THE NON-DUAL EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC INVESTIGATION OF THE SEEKER'S JOURNEY TOWARDS WHOLENESS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the psycho-spiritual transformations on the journey towards Wholeness. Two questions presented themselves asking "What are the actual themes that emerge from the stories of those on a journey" and "What are the transformational experiences encountered along a journey towards Wholeness?" A phenomenological hermeneutic research format was used to investigate and understand the particular themes that emerged from the co-researchers stories. This methodology allowed the researcher to approach the phenomenon being investigated with respect and sensitivity in honouring the actual lived experiences of the co-researchers. Under this framework, research interviews were conducted with nine co-researchers; seven men and two women, which produced a set of narratives depicting the lived experiences of those on a journey towards Wholeness. Through a hermeneutical analysis of the deep meanings embedded within each narrative a collection of sub-themes were arranged and from them nine major themes emerged. They included: 1) vulnerable beginnings, 2) a journey into the unknown, 3) journeying through relationships, 4) a turbulent encounter with ourselves, 5) the guru-disciple relationship, 6) exposing the root of suffering, 7) the end of seeking, 8) radical understanding, and 9) luminous impersonal existence. A summary of the findings was provided along with a look at the limitations of this study and the implications this study has in the counselling relationship. It is clear that the powerful experience of letting go of separate self existence, conventional notions of space and time, and the journey altogether leads to the understanding of Wholeness right here, right now.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY

A Journey Towards Wholeness

My own transformational process is the fuel for this thesis. At an early age I recognized a sense of inner fragmentation, feeling out of place and lost within my surroundings; not knowing where to go or how to name the experience unfolding within me. My journey began in high school where, like most teenagers, I began to rebel against authority and intensely question societal conditionings and expectations. It was difficult to hear close friends attempt to plan their whole life in five year intervals outlining when they planned to finish school, enter the workforce, settle down and get married, have children, retire and finally die. I would often question how they could be certain of anything happening in such a sequential order. I thought the only thing certain for them in their future was their immanent death.

It was at this time that I smiled believing I had found an answer to my dilemma. Death was the only certainty in life and everyone was going to have to face it. However, with this new found certainty that one day I will cease to be, I was soon plunged into a withdrawn, nihilistic existence; floating through my day-to-day life with no hope of finding anything that would pull me out of this depriving sense of emptiness. Life had very little meaning to me and I felt this at cellular level. The more I began to allow death into my everyday existence the more I began to experience new and raw emotions. This feeling of emptiness left me with periods of overwhelming anxiety and loneliness. My

only hope for peace was to escape it was through becoming habitually occupied with life and all of its distractions.

Five years ago, if one were to have asked me to comment on the nature of the journey towards Wholeness I would have responded with a confused look followed by harsh judgments accusing the questioner of being a "flake." What did it mean to be whole? Unknowingly, as my academic pursuits led me from Toronto, ON to Lethbridge, AB to complete my last two years of an Addictions Counselling degree, I was about to experience a profound shift in consciousness. This was when I began to intensely question "Who I thought I was" and "Who it was that died?" while participating in a counselling lab session, resulting in my beginning journey towards Wholeness.

A shift in perspective occurred in the way I navigated my life while in Lethbridge when I was introduced to existential psychotherapy. Immediately I began reading and highlighting passages from Rollo May, Irvin Yalom, Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche. I digested every insight and philosophical assumption about my place within the world. Finally I was not alone in this "existential vacuum." This was a common experience felt by many. Here were my heroes, I thought. Not only did I begin to develop my own counselling framework while embracing existential psychotherapy, but also I began making personal connections when recognizing the themes of meaninglessness, freedom, isolation and being and non-being within my own life. It was beginning to make sense for me. I thoroughly enjoyed adopting a philosopher's approach to life and I was appropriately validated by my friends and colleagues at work. I engaged in melancholic and over-energized discussions about Beingness, embracing the existential moment, dread and angst. However, unbeknownst to me at the time, I was

me at the time, I was merely collecting explanations for my experiences, which only provided me with temporary relief. In the face of an empty existence I finally found a sense of security or so I thought. This sense of psychological security soon faded when I continued to have no definitive answer to "who" it was experiencing this, leaving me with the all too familiar sense of emptiness.

Not long after I began to experience this sense of emptiness more frequently and at an increasingly intense level. The sense of dread and angst was becoming more of a moment-to-moment phenomenon. I felt as though I was at the end of the line, and encountered what many of the existentialists called, "attempting to find meaning in a world without meaning." There appeared to be absolutely nowhere to go. Realizing the moment was all there was, I unfortunately formed a relationship with it based on anger and despair.

It was towards the end of my first semester in a group counselling lab session that I experienced what many of my fellow students referred to as a "world collapse." Thankfully, the lab was intended to promote counselling as a journey process where developing counsellors were invited to share their experiences. I recall sharing my feelings of emptiness and dread describing it as if I was walking through life with a heavy wet blanket wrapped around me; void of any substance and puzzled as to the cause of it. At this moment, I was encouraged to step into the middle of the group and invited to recreate the experience crouching on my knees while a student wrapped a blanket around me creating an enclosed dark womb-like atmosphere. Almost immediately, I curled up in a foetal position and broke down, becoming extremely emotional. I made the decent into emptiness, but rather than escaping from it I was encouraged to remain with it resulting in

a collapse of everything that existed in my life; a shattering of my fragile sense of self. Here the concepts of time, gender, family, name and age fell away. All conditionings instantly dissolved leaving "no one" there. The sense of "me" simply vanished. The experience was void of everything I held so dearly, empty of all beliefs, concepts and absolute statements. Even my complaints against existence disappeared. It was the presence of infinite spaciousness. Nothing was there, yet, I did not feel it to be a negative experience. Soon after, I realized this was a first taste of the non-dual experience.

Certainly there must be some explanation for such an experience I thought. After consulting with close friends, and specifically with Gary Nixon (the professor who facilitated the lab) I shared my experiences only to be told that I was simply "losing" myself and experiencing what Zen master Bodhidharma called my "Original Face." I was introduced to transpersonal psychology, the "Fourth Force" of psychology, which helped me to process such experiences and stretched my thirst for Wholeness to a new level.

Meditative practices became an integral part of my daily life. I participated in Buddhist practices including *Vipassana* and *Tonglen* breathing meditations, the Essene darkness meditations, Hatha Yoga exercises, and swimming meditations. In addition to contemplative meditative practices I participated in numerous encounter groups, which stripped away conventional boundaries and allowed for a full experience of repressed aspects of the self. I also participated in primal scream therapy sessions which facilitated deeper exploration of body-mind energy blocks by removing defensive ego structures and allowing for a raw, cathartic experience of primal emotions. I realized I was not my thoughts, and by remaining a witness to them I could dis-identify with them and remain centered in my being. A felt sense of reconnection brought about waves of peace, bliss

and periods of what appeared to be timelessness. My new found heroes became transpersonal theorists Ken Wilber, A. H. Almaas, Abraham Maslow, Stansilov Grof and Eastern and Western mystics including Osho, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Chogyam Trungpa, Papaji and Bodhidharma. Nothing else appeared to matter in life but the journey.

However, I adopted the enlightened approach to life, "spinning" people about living a false existence and how they were simply caught up in material pleasures and were ignorant of higher levels of development. Even though I felt the brunt of such a position, which was unbeknownst to me as narcissistic, I suffered the dissolution of close relationships, friendships, and job opportunities. Predictably, a dark night of the soul ensued, in which, periods of depression, indifference and aloofness emerged. In the midst of my struggles I found insight into my dilemma when reading Trungpa's book "Spiritual Materialism." It detailed the seeker's attachment to spiritual pursuits which were simply no different than accumulating material possessions. It was another, smoother way of recreating ego attachments.

Surrendering to the moment was critical when avoiding the pitfalls of grasping and attempting to re-create a sense of "I." I was recreating myself through spiritual pursuits. A period was spent allowing what was manifesting within the moment "to be" rather than creating struggles through personal judgments. It was in the absence of struggle that I found insight and intuition. This was similar to the moment I experienced in the lab session when I felt the world around me collapse. Spaciousness existed when surrendering judgments and personal positions. A sense of letting the moment be, "as it is", appeared to be enough.

On a trip back to Toronto I had a similar experience while at my grandmother's funeral gazing at her corpse in an open casket. I experienced intense warmth filling my body with what felt like tingling sensations racing throughout my system. Without judgment I suddenly saw myself as the dead body. Staring at her face, the sense of "I" fell away and I felt totally interconnected with the energy in the room and existence. It felt like death right now. It was then that I realized existence was available to me in the moment and to search for it was futile. The gap preventing the embracement of Wholeness was me and my avoidance of death through time. Death was no longer down the road somewhere; it was here right now, passing through me. I recognized there was nowhere to go and the present moment was all there was. The non-dual experience was now vibrating inside me and hence left a huge question mark in my daily moment-to-moment existence.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate people's journeys towards a no-self experience commonly referred to as non-duality. It is a study that will explore those who are on a journey to discover the ultimate nature of who they are and what is needed to change in becoming whole. The research question is, "What are the transformational experiences encountered along a journey towards Wholeness?" A second question is "What are the actual themes that emerge from the stories of those on such a journey?" The intent of this study is to illuminate some common themes as shared in the lived experiences of those on a journey towards Wholeness.

The Implicated Researcher

This type of research is unique in that as the researcher, I am very much implicated as a co-researcher in the study. I have been on the journey towards Wholeness for over five years and I bring a set of personal biases to the evolving research. As an existential-transpersonal counsellor who is aware of the transformative development and issues encountered along a journey towards Wholeness, I am connected with the philosophy and experiences that emerge from this study. It is important to acknowledge these biases instead of overlooking them and pretending, through the use of objective language and methodology, that they do not play a role in the research. Although it has been difficult, I have avoided the temptation to hide these biases from the research.

As hermeneutic philosopher Gadamer (1975) warned, it is critically important to present one's personal bias or what he calls a set of "prejudices," and expose them into the open rather than pretending to take on an objective position where they do not exist and thus affect the research. A main concern of Gadamer's (1975) was that we bring to light our unexamined prejudices "so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (p. 238). This is what is meant by the "prejudice against prejudice" (p. 240). We are always immersed within a field of understanding which makes absolute objectivity impossible. As Sass (1988) points out:

> Any attempt to dispense completely with prejudices would, in all likelihood, lead not to their eradication but only to their deeper concealment and perhaps to a certain impoverishment of knowing vision (as is the case with radical

behaviourism and other forms of positivism that only seem to be theory-free) (p. 251).

To hide these biases through an objective position simply reinforces their power and influence which ultimately serves to obscure the unfolding research. In working with these unavoidable prejudices Gadamer (1976) invites the researcher not to attempt to eradicate these prejudices, but to recognize them as potential barriers to understanding the lived experience and, more importantly, as an alternative view in illuminating the experience. This would lead to new dimensions of understanding for they are "biases of our openness to the world" (p. 9).

Since I am already implicated in the research before having even begun it this is an attempt to acknowledge and lay bare my existing biases and prejudices so that I can enter the study free of the illusion of objectivity.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis explores the topic of the non-dual experience and the seeker's journey towards Wholeness in four subsequent chapters. Chapter Two outlines a review of the theoretical literature on this topic which was necessary groundwork when conducting this research. It begins with honouring the spirit of the journey by examining the perennial philosophy, the spectrum of consciousness, and mystic pathways, which sets the foundation for understanding the transformational aspects encountered along the journey towards Wholeness. Chapter Three explores the methodological framework used in approaching and conducting the research with individuals who have had transformational

experiences on the journey towards Wholeness. Chapter Four gives a thematic presentation of the narrative accounts of nine co-researchers along the journey towards Wholeness. Chapter Five, the final chapter, I considered the limitations of this thesis as well as the implications emerging from the research. I will now begin with a review of the literature.

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Honouring the Call of the Journey

The call of the journey towards Wholeness has been noted historically. Notable mystics such as Gautama the Buddha, Jesus the Christ, Krishna, and even more recently Ramana Maharshi and Nisargaddata Maharaj, to name a few, have heeded the call of their own journey and shared their subsequent experiences. The call presents itself in various experiences, which will be explored more fully in the following chapters. Some feel it as an aching, desperate desire to know the fundamental nature of who and what one's nature truly is. This desire is often so overwhelming that one begins, like the mystics of old, to deny the temporary satisfactions of daily living and embark on a journey for that which will reveal their essential identity. In his own journey Watts (1972) realized that "Of all the mysteries of the external world ... nothing is so profound an enigma as the internal mystery of man's own identity" (p. 76). This becomes one's sole purpose and meaning in life. Underhill (2002) described this desire as a point of departure on the journey. She says:

> We meet these persons in the east and the west; in the ancient, mediaeval and modern worlds. Their one passion appears to be the prosecution of a certain spiritual and intangible quest: the finding of a "way out" or a "way back" to some desirable state in which alone they can satisfy their craving for absolute truth (p. 3).

The "way back" is a transformational journey into more expansive unchartered realms of human consciousness that stretch beyond the limits of normal ego-sensory awareness. They are both frightening and exciting at the same time. Beliefs that were once held as absolute truths become suddenly transparent and dissolve into the mystery of the unknown.

The journey for Wholeness exists in most of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. After describing these, I well explore the perennial philosophy, and then go into more detail about the various transformational stages and experiences encountered along a journey towards Wholeness. I will then outline a transpersonal theoretical orientation towards the nature and process of consciousness development. This will be followed by a description of how some recent mystics appeared to undo the knot of individuality.

The Perennial Philosophy

When exploring the seeker's journey towards Wholeness it is important to look to the perennial philosophy for guidance. It is a traditional vision native to all the world's religious and spiritual traditions including mainstream Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, and existing in renowned scientific, philosophical and psychological communities (Huxley, 1945; Smith, 1982; 1976; Wilber, 1993a). It is a philosophy expressing the nature of Divine Reality existing in all things, a thread in the universe running through all animate and inanimate objects alike or, as described by Smith (1982), that "... beneath the surface shuttlings of our sensations, precepts and thoughts, wrapped

in the envelope of soul is the eternal and the divine, the final Reality: not soul, not personality, but All-Self" (p. 128). In a similar vein, Helminski (1992) described it as "... something nonexistent, something that cannot be touched, seen, or even thought, and yet this nothing is more important than anything else, the fathomless source of all qualities and all possibilities" (p. 29).

Aldus Huxley (1945) noted Leibniz as the philosopher who cornered the phrase "philosophia perennis" in his anthology of perennial philosophers. He described it as:

> ---the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being--- (Huxley, p. vii).

Schmitt (1966) synthesized the work of perennial philosophers dating back thousands of years and found the philosophy grounded in Platonism, mysticism, positivism, naturalism, Catholic philosophy and both Eastern and Western philosophy alike. He recognized it as a philosophy of certain everlasting truths dating back to all historical periods explored by such philosophical thinkers noted by Wilber (1993a) who chartered different dimensions of Being including consciousness (Aurobindo, n.d.), and Beingness (Heidegger, 1962). The perennial philosophy is conceptualized as the study of ontology, or the exploration of Being (Smith, 1982).

One of the central structures in the perennial philosophy is the Great Chain of Being. It presents being and consciousness as a nested hierarchical system built of numerous levels, beginning with matter, then body, then mind, and finally soul and spirit

(Wilber, 1993a; Smith, 1982). As Wilber (1993a) pointed out, various conventional and contemplative schools of development have presented the Great Chain as having three levels: matter, mind and spirit, with some of the yogic developmental systems outlining dozens of different levels. Each version attempts to describe a process similar to Smith's (1976) integration of the levels of selfhood which integrates body, mind, soul, and spirit. Aurobindo (n.d.) recognized numerous levels of consciousness ascending to what he called Super-Mind, and Gopi Krishna (1972) provided a Kundalini description of the seven-chakra levels beginning at the base of the spine and opening up at the crown of the head. Maslow's (1968; 1971) hierarchy of needs led to the understanding of human needs beginning at the basic level, which then evolves to self-actualization and finally towards metaphysical understanding and spiritual fulfillment.

In the present study, I will use the well-known Western version of the Great Chain described by Smith (1976) which is comprised of five levels of existence. The physical universe known as "Matter" is the first link of the Great Chain. The "Body" is the emotional body in which the biological needs including sex, hunger and survival are met. The "Mind" is the third link along the Great Chain and consists of the cognitive, linguistic and imaginative aspects of the evolving self. This is the world of psychology. The subtle level contains the "Soul" which is described as the intuitive archetypal mind and the essence of one's own being. Finally, "Spirit," also called the Absolute, Non-dual, Void, Nirvana, or Oneness in various religious and wisdom traditions, is transcendental and the Ground of Being that includes all the lower levels of development (Smith, 1976; Wilber, 1993a).

According to The Great Chain of Being, the universe is composed of "an infinite number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existence ... to the highest possible kind of creature ... the Absolute Being" (Lovejoy, 1971, p. 59). It was Lovejoy's (1936) contention that every animate and inanimate object played a role and had its place in existence along the Great Chain of Being. Reality simply was not one-dimensional but multidimensional in its expression.

The Great Chain of Being implies a linear progression, or a hierarchy of existence, suggesting that only those who ascend to the highest level of consciousness experience non-dualism. This is not the case. Schumacher (1977) clarifies this misconception by suggesting that the Great Chain of Being can be referred to as "The Great Nest of Being" where an interconnected mutual relationship exists with each higher level of the Chain embracing its lower levels. Wilber (1996) emphasizes that Spirit does not exist only at the highest level of the Great Chain rather, Spirit exists in all dimensions of consciousness. He states, "[It] Transcends all, includes all, as the groundless Ground or Emptiness of all manifestation" (p. 38). In support, Koestler (1976) shares that Reality is composed of "holons," introducing "Holoarchy" in substitution for hierarchy, with the former being an embracement of Wholeness in which a part that is a whole in itself at one level is also a part of another greater whole at a higher level. The idea is to be open to all levels of the Great Chain from the lowest possible level of matter to the highest level of Spirit, to integrate all the links on the Great Chain of Being rather than being exclusively identified with only one.

Thus, the journey towards Wholeness has begun for those wishing to embrace higher levels of consciousness and make that fundamental shift to return home, to one's

natural abode as the Absolute. For a closer look at the intricate shifts made in each level of human consciousness development I will turn to the work and vision of transpersonal psychology.

Embracing a Transpersonal Vision

For the vast majority, we are only half way home. A turn away from conventional Western psychology is needed to process and describe expansive states of consciousness beyond the individual self. In exploring the nature of consciousness development, particularly with the higher levels, it will be important to turn to the "Fourth Force" of psychology, that of transpersonal psychology, for a clearer and more in-depth understanding of this mysterious unfolding as it applies to the journey towards Wholeness.

Wilber (1996) regarded Abraham Maslow as the founding father of transpersonal psychology. These are the "Four Forces" in the field of psychology including a) behaviourism, b) psychoanalysis, c) the humanistic and existential approaches, and now d) transpersonal or spiritual approaches. Each school offers something important and, at the same time, has limitations and should be approached with an open and critical mind. Transpersonal psychology is a theoretical vision that attempts to embrace all stages of life including that of the prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal realms rather than solely address the spiritual or transpersonal levels of human development (Wilber, 1999a).

Since the emergence of transpersonal psychology, several transpersonal theorists have attempted to develop a comprehensive template integrating both Eastern and

Western thought when mapping out the different levels of consciousness and self-transcendence (Assagioli, 1971; Boorstein, 1996; Grof, 1985; Pelletier & Charles, 1976; Vaughan, 1986; Washburn, 1988; Wilber, 1977; 1985; 1999a). For the purposes of this study I will demonstrate how transpersonal psychology is an appropriate theoretical foundation for describing experiences beyond ego-identity. The next section will look at this unfolding process of consciousness with a specific emphasis on the transpersonal levels through an examination of the work of two leading figures in the transpersonal community, that of Ken Wilber and A. H. Almass.

The Spectrum of Consciousness

Ken Wilber (1977) introduced the most widely influential map of consciousness development called the "Spectrum of Consciousness," which integrates both Eastern contemplative traditions and Western schools of psychology. It is what Wilber (1999a) called a "full spectrum model of human growth and development" (p. 49) combining conventional schools of psychology including psychoanalytic, behavioural, and humanistic-existential with contemplative disciplines that acknowledge the higher stages of consciousness development. At each level in the development of consciousness there are unique, potential pathologies with corresponding treatment interventions (Wilber, 1999a; 2000).

The model is comprised of ten basic structures of consciousness beginning with the development of the lower structures proceeding up the holoarchy to the highest subtlest structures (Wilber, 1999a). The spectrum of development is a potential for every

individual in that each person has the opportunity for higher levels of consciousness development with movement through subconscious, self-conscious, and superconscious dimensions, also referred to as prepersonal, personal and transpersonal stages of development. Wilber (1999a) gives a detailed illustration of each of the ten levels:

Prepersonal (pre-ego)

1. Sensoriphysical: The realms of matter, sensation, and perception.
2. Phantasmic-emotional: The birth of the emotional self
3. Rep-mind: The birth of the conceptual self.

Personal (ego)

4. Rule/Role mind: The development of rules and roles to belong.
5. Formal-reflexive: The development of the mature ego.
6. Vision-logic: The existential level.

Transpersonal (Trans-ego)

7. Psychic: Characterized as the opening of the "third eye." Also known as the gateway to the transpersonal.
8. Subtle: Direct apprehension of deity-energy form.
9. Casual: Witnessing the abyss.
10. Non-dual: Integration of form and formlessness and previous levels.

In the prepersonal stage of conscious development, Wilber (1999a) has integrated the work and developmental models of Piaget (1977) and Mahler et al (1975) to formulate each conventional level. The first three levels of development give rise to the birth of a bodily self, an emotional self, and finally a conceptual sense of self, marking the beginning stages of egoic development (Wilber 1999a).

Wilber (1999a) viewed Mahler et al's (1975) separation-individuation process as being crucial in illustrating the development of the self through the first three levels. At the sensoriphysical level the self is at the beginning stages of development in which it is fused with the physical world, operating from the body and acting on "purely somatic defence mechanisms, consisting of overflow and discharge reactions" (Wilber 1999a, p. 98). The self at this stage has no concept of its distinct physical presence set apart from its environment, surroundings and presence of others.

Successful development through the first level occurs when the infant goes through what Mahler et al (1975) calls the "hatching phase" and separates itself from the physical world, giving birth to the body-ego where it begins to recognize personal bodily movements (Mahler et al, 1975; Wilber, 1999a). A disturbance in this stage results in the self failing to delineate the marked separation of the body and the physical environment, causing most adult schizophrenia and depressive psychoses (Wilber, 1999a). It is when "consciousness fails to seat in the physical body; thoughts of self and other are confused" (Wilber, 1996a, p. 163). Given that this level is quite primitive in its manifestation and difficult to treat, Wilber (2000) recommended physiological or pharmaceutical therapeutic interventions.

As the self develops and attempts to establish healthy physical boundaries against the outside world, the birth of the emotional self occurs, allowing the conscious self to recognize, differentiate and integrate emotional processes outlined in the phantasmic-emotional level (Wilber, 1996a; 1999a). The infant experiences emotional states distinct from others, including the experience of sensations, pleasure and pain, while attempting to develop individual emotional boundaries. Until the self establishes emotional

boundaries it remains extremely narcissistic, treating the world as an extension of itself (Wilber 1996a). Failure at this level can leave the individual with weak and distorted emotional boundaries displayed as severe narcissism, anxiety, depression, and borderline pathologies (Wilber, 1996a; 1999a). Interventions at this level consist of structure-building techniques which foster continued development through the separation-individuation phase, allowing the healthy differentiation process of self and other to occur (Wilber, 2000). If healthy progression succeeds, the bodily self who emerged in the previous level is transcended and consciousness begins to identify itself with the emotional self, experiencing both pleasures and displeasures of the manifest world (Wilber, 1999a).

Once the self has transcended and integrated body-ego awareness into the newly formed emotional self, the birth of the conceptual self increasingly emerges through language development, which "carries the ability to picture things and events which are not immediately present to the body senses" (Wilber, 1996b, p. 80). This is the representational level of consciousness development similar to Piaget's (1977) level of preoperational thinking. The development of the mental ego manifests itself by dis-identifying from the emotional world to include the cognitive mental world where it begins to verbalize and control behaviours. Here, "The self is starting to differentiate from the [emotional] body" (Wilber, 1996b, p. 80), moving into the existence of a mental, verbal being. Developmentally, the self can now operate in the concept of time conceptualizing past and future events, intensifying bodily functions, and envisioning things in cognitive awareness not achievable through simple physical senses (Wilber, 1999a). Potential disturbances at this level occur when the self learns to repress certain

aspects, which are seen as unacceptable by others, particularly family members, resulting in neuroses, including compulsions, obsessions and hysterias (Wilber 1999a).

Uncovering techniques are used to dissolve the pattern of repressed emotions often referred to as the shadow self by making contact with them, and reintegrating them into cognitive awareness and producing fluid consciousness development (Wilber, 2000). Such therapeutic interventions exist within Jungian and Gestalt therapy as well as with psychoanalysis and ego psychology (Wilber, 2000). This level concludes the prepersonal stage of the self's movement through the first three levels of consciousness development described by Wilber (1996b) as a "... slumbering Spirit stage ... the lowest form of Spirit in its return to Spirit" (p. 334).

The self has moved from the prepersonal to the personal stage of development, which involves the development of the mature ego (Wilber, 1999a). Wilber (1999a) illustrates how the mature self attempts to function and exist in society by achieving a sense of belongingness (Rule/Role) and then later beginning to construct its own stance in the world (Formal-reflexive) and then, ultimately, facing what Yalom (1980) calls the "giving's of existence," confronting existential concerns (Vision-logic). Here, Wilber (1996b) terms the personal stage as the return of "Spirit to Spirit, the overcoming of self-alienation ... typical egoic or mental awareness" (p. 334). Wilber (1999a) included the works of Loevinger (1976) in detailing a conformist self-sense at this level; Maslow's (1954) self-needs of fitting in and belonging; and Kohlberg's (1981) conventional moral sense. In the early prepersonal stage, the self is recognized as possessing an impulsive egocentric aspect, attempting to establish its basic need for safety coupled with undeveloped preconventional morals.

Following the prepersonal stage, the personal stage begins with the rule/role mind. As the mental self transcends the representational mind of simple concepts, it begins to take on rules and roles to belong in society, moving from an egocentric position to a sociocentric position. Here, consciousness has expanded from the confined self to recognize itself in others. The self can now begin to assume and imitate a role as well as take on the role of others. It expresses the desire to be accepted amongst others for the purpose of avoiding the fear of losing ones sense of self-identity (Wilber, 1999a). If not fully integrated, certain rule and role pathologies emerge where "the individual overtly communicates one message ... while covertly implying another" (Wilber, 1999a, p. 124), resulting in false beliefs and cognitive scripts about oneself. Treatment includes cognitive therapy (Ellis, 1973), which challenge the individual's distorted and false belief system in hope of developing a healthier, accurate self-concept (Wilber, 2000).

Formal-reflexive development is the fifth level in the spectrum. As the self develops healthy social rules and roles, it reaches a state in which it tires living merely a conventional, moral, sociocentric position. It moves beyond the confines of societal bondage and begins to develop a highly differentiated, reflexive self-structure characterized by a reliance on its own individual principles of reason (Wilber, 1999a). Now the individual can conceptualize future possibilities, and move through personal fears and desires. In essence she becomes a "philosopher, a dreamer in the best and highest sense; an internally reflexive mirror, awestruck at its own existence" (Wilber, 1999, p. 125). Pathologies existing at this level involve "identity neurosis" where the self attempts to negotiate its own stance in existence, thinking and learning for itself. It challenges conventional norms, honouring and accepting the newly emerging self

structure while adopting the beginning stages of a worldcentric, post conventional existence. In addition to philosophical problems, the transition from the previous conformist social space to an individual global space is not fluid. It is necessary to work through this to facilitate movement to higher levels of consciousness (Wilber, 1999a).

When the self embraces its own position in the world and becomes grounded in its mature egoic expression, the individual encounters vision-logic or what is commonly referred to as the existential level where the experiences of body and mind are integrated (Wilber 1999a). Here, the self encounters this "personal life [as] a brief spark in the cosmic void" (Wilber 1999a, p. 126), in which awareness has shifted away from exclusive social identity. As a result, the individual feels the pull to move away from conventional securities and distractions, no longer being able to "tranquilize itself with the trivial" (Wilber, 1996a, p. 193). The self has experienced all it can handle in the personal egoic realm. He sees the world as unappealing, where all meanings, hopes, and desires have dissolved before him, moment-to-moment, while the "skull grins silently over the whole affair" (Wilber, 1996a, p. 195). The work of the existentialists details an individual's confrontation with apparent meaninginglessness, death, anxiety, freedom and aloneness (Frankl, 1972; May et al, 1958; Yalom, 1980), being and non-being (Heidegger, 1962), dread and angst (Kierkegaard, 1944), and self-actualization (Maslow, 1968, 1971; Rogers, 1961, 1980). It is here, at the level of vision-logic that recognized Western psychology fails to honour development beyond the personal ego realm into the transpersonal, trans-ego levels of development.

Pathologies at this level result in the individual's inability to manage conscious movement through complete self-actualization needs, while at the same time embracing

the realization of its own mortality. This results in the following problems outlined by Wilber (1999a):

1. Existential Depression: Depression as a result of attempting to find meaning in a world void of apparent meaning.
2. Inauthenticity: The struggle in accepting one's own mortality.
3. Existential Isolation: A highly developed self-structure that feels out of place or "not at home" in the world.
4. Aborted Self-Actualization: The individual neglects to actualize his or her full potential. He consciously "sells himself out."
5. Existential Anxiety: The loss or death of one's capabilities or ways of being in the world.

Ultimately, one is left with oneself in the face of death and total meaninglessness, a place void of groundedness and definition, a plane of existence abandoned of all hope. The personal realm has melted away, leaving the individual self with nowhere to go but beyond the body and mind and venture into the realm of the transpersonal (Wilber, 1999a). The self begins to transcend its separate-self identity and open up to higher levels of conscious awareness. The Western mystic Krishnamurti (1970) observed, "There is something vast and immeasurable beyond the mind, a loveliness which the mind cannot understand" (p. 246). In order to experience that which is beyond comprehension one must transcend the individual body mind.

The transpersonal realm begins with the psychic level. The Eastern contemplative schools assist in its description. The psychic level is conceptualized as the opening of the "third eye," the beginning emergence of the transpersonal levels in which conscious

identity shifts from the postconventional worldcentric identity illustrated in the previous stage to the experience of the "World Soul." This is a universal view with continual self transcendence taking place revealing movement towards unification and dissolution of subject-object dualism (Wilber, 1996a; 1999a). The individual's cognitive capabilities become more refined and universal, moving beyond the narrow personalized view of existence existing in the lower levels and beginning to reach beyond the body mind and moving into expanded perceptiveness (Willber, 1999a).

Comparatively, Wilber (1999a) paralleled the psychic level with Aurobindo's (n.d.) illumined mind, which is growth beyond mere thoughts to greater illuminated inner insight, as well as with introductory stages of many eastern religious meditations including Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. Temporarily, the individual self begins to experience the dissolution of the separate-self sense, and merge with the gross, manifest world. This is also referred to as nature mysticism in which the gap between self and other begins to close (Wilber, 1996a). Maslow (1961) described such temporary experiences as "peak experiences" in which the individual feels more whole, integrated, and "... at the peak of his powers" (p. 255). It is a temporary transcendence of the self, "a going beyond and above self-hood. The person can then become egoless" (Maslow, 1961, p. 255). According to Wilber (1999a), the seeker experiences several pathologies at different points in the seeker's beginning contemplative development:

1. Structural imbalance: Faulty practice of the spiritual technique: Usually results in mild anxiety and symptoms including headaches, minor heart arrhythmia and intestinal discomforts.

2. The Dark Night of the Soul: When the temporary experience of ecstasy fades away, the individual may suffer abandonment depression, in which the self has tasted Wholeness only to watch it fade.
3. Split-Life Goals: The decision of whether to remain in the world or live a reclusive meditative existence, splitting the lower and higher self-needs.
4. Psychic Inflation: The ego identifies with newly developed transpersonal energy, resulting in redefined separate self-fixations.
5. Pranic Disorders: A misdirection of Kundalini energy in the early stages of its emergence causing involuntary uncontrollable muscle spasms, breathing difficulties and severe headaches.
6. Yogic Illness: When the development of higher levels of consciousness strains the physical-emotional body

The next level is the subtle level which is characterized by deeper intuition into archetypal presence. The subtle level is the emergence of actual archetypal forms consisting of subtle sounds and audible illuminations, profound clarity and transcendent intuition (Aurobindo, n.d; Da Free John, 1977; Evans-Wentz, 1971; Wilber, 1999a). Clearly exemplified in Buddhist scriptures, the subtle level is similar to sambhogakaya which describes intense dancing light and colors understood through deep intuition and experience (Evan-Wentz, 1971). Wilber (1999a) suggests the subtle level is the origin of personal deity-energy form, a witnessing of something far beyond the previous level, beyond nature mysticism, beyond rationality, and is commonly referred to as deity-mysticism. Fox (1988) illustrates an example of the archetypal self in what he calls the "cosmic Christ." He explains, "It is the outward birth of the image of God from within"

(p. 64). It is the conscious self continually transcending the individual body-mind and developing towards increasing Wholeness," and a direct encounter with Spirit, with your own essence," a recognition of ones true essence (Wilber, 1999b, p. 360). Unfortunately, seekers mistake the subtle level and its associated forms as final liberation, or union with Divine Reality (Goleman, 1988). Wilber (1999a) describes such pathologies as:

1. Integration-Identification Failure: Represented by a split between self and archetype characterized as struggle for the mental self to dissolve and give birth to archetypal presence and identity. Portions of the archetype are then perceived as separate from identity, creating yet another dualism stunting growth to non-duality.
2. Pseudo-nirvana: Identifying with archetypal forms as complete Wholeness and final death of the separate self.
3. Pseudo-realization: The self observes the content of consciousness as being a frightening experience producing physical and mental discomfort, which is a normal process of consciousness expansion, but becomes pathological when the self is unable to move beyond this phenomenon and remains stuck in its own misery.

The attachment to archetypal form is transcended in the next level, the causal level. The causal level is a complete witnessing of manifest and unmanifest forms as they arise in consciousness. Wilber (1999a) describes it as a formless self in which:

> You are an opening, a clearing, an Emptiness, a vast spaciousness, in which all these objects come and go ... sensations come and go, thoughts come and go---and you are none of them; you are the vast sense of freedom, that vast Emptiness,

that vast opening, through which manifestation arises, stays a bit, and goes (Wilber, 1996a, p. 222).

Maharshi (2000) calls the causal level, the "I-I," which is aware of its separate self yet cannot observe itself. He states, "Be the Self and the desires and doubts will disappear. The Self is the witness in the sleep, dream and waking states of existence" (p.3). The causal level houses the pure subjective witness. This is where deity-mysticism gives rise to formless mysticism, which is prior to all time, space, objects, all phenomena (Wilber, 1996a). Wilber (1999a) describes pathologies at the causal level as:

1. Failure of Differentiation: A failure to allow the archetypal self to completely dissolve, resulting in incomplete transcendence.
2. Failure to Integrate: A dualism still exists between the witness and differentiated objects of consciousness, a split between the manifest and unmanifest realms.

The final level, the non-dual, is commonly referred to in various wisdom traditions as Wholeness, the Absolute, the Atman, Brahman, Emptiness, and Nirvana. Formless mysticism is replaced by non-dual mysticism. As consciousness dis-identifies with the witness and integrates it in all experiences, a union between form and formlessness takes place (Wilber, 1996a, 1999a). Wilber (1999b) shares, "What appear as hard or solid objects 'out there' are really transparent and translucent manifestations of your own being" (p. 361). It is paradoxical in nature being "both fullness and nothingness.... All phenomena appear as a substantial, dynamic presence, but when we investigate this presence, we do not find it ... everything appears as a phantasmagoric display of dazzling brilliance without ever existing" (Almaas, 1996, p. 434). The

conscious self encounters the non-dual state for the first time only to realize it has been present all along covered by a false sense of self, an illusion masking our essential essence. The Eastern mystic Balsekar (1992) calls this "sudden understanding" in which the "... individual me is totally annihilated, when there is an intuitive insight in which there is no individual comprehender" (p. 187). It is a complete dissolution of the separate self and embracement of total Wholeness, which is an embracement of all the lesser levels throughout the spectrum (Wilber, 1996a, 1999a). It is life's greatest mystery, yet at the same time, it is that which has always been available in every state but covered by the illusion of the separate self, and as a result of dropping the separate self, one returns to what was essentially there all along, Divine Reality. Ramana Maharshi (2000) speaks from the Absolute:

> There is no greater mystery than the following: Ourselves being the Reality, we seek to gain reality. We think there is something hiding our Reality, and that it must be destroyed before Reality is gained. That is ridiculous. A day will dawn when you will yourself laugh at your past efforts. That which will be on the day you laugh is also here and now (p. xix).

We are that which we are seeking. It is all one spontaneous motion without any individual effort.

Considerable attention has been paid to Wilber's (1977) spectrum of consciousness model in relation to the journey towards Wholeness. It would be important to support the process of transformative experiences by taking a look at a rival transpersonal theorist, A.H. Almaas, and his unique work on transforming narcissistic identifications into self-realization entitled, the Diamond Approach.

The Diamond Approach

The Diamond Approach is a process used when working with people toward inner realization. It has its roots in depth psychology, particularly in ego psychology and object relations theory. It uses elements of these theories and extends them into the metaphysical, spiritual and religious domains of the human psyche. As a multifaceted synthesis of modern depth psychology and spiritual understanding, the Diamond Approach has been recognized in the transpersonal community as another, equally important model which addresses narcissistic patterns and transforms them into Essential Identity. During the process, the individual will encounter a number of experiences when transcending his or her false self-representations (Almaas, 1986; 1988; 1996).

Narcissism is the barrier to self-realization. It is an alienation from the deeper dimensions of the self. According to Almaas (1996) the following stages are a working-through process of realizing essential identity:

1. Fakeness
2. The shell
3. The narcissistic wound
4. The great betrayal
5. Narcissistic rage, hatred and envy
6. Narcissistic emptiness, meaninglessness and pointlessness
7. Loss of orientation, centre and self-recognition
8. Narcissistic shame
9. Narcissistic rejection object relation

10. Selfless inner spaciousness
11. Ego activity
12. Narcissistic depression
13. Helplessness and nondoing
14. Trust and the need for holding
15. The ego ideal
16. The holding loving light
17. The Essential Identity
18. Point-diamond, or essential self-recognition and resolution of the need for mirroring

We are a collection of images culminating in the impression of self-identity. As one begins to acknowledge and work through ego identifications the understanding emerges that self-identity is composed of images from past experiences. One comes to realize that what they have taken as their actual identity is nothing more than an empty shell. The empty shell is a false representation of our essential identity. It has the quality of insubstantiality in that one feels hollow and vacant, "... as if his body has become a shell of tension with its insides sucked out of it" (Almaas, 1996, p. 304). The more one experiences this empty shell the more one recognizes having lived a fake existence, and having lived life from the position of the empty shell rather than from his essential core (Almaas, 1996).

Once the empty shell is exposed the structure of what has constituted the self is threatened. The usual psychological supports which have fed the false image have failed and one is left feeling utterly exposed, naked and sensitive (Almaas, 1996). He explains,

"The slightest indication of not being seen will evoke deep pain, intolerable anguish, endless tears about a bottomless grief. When investigated, rather than reacted to, this hurt reveals an emotional wound of staggering depth and profundity" (p. 310). The narcissistic wound is not so much as having lost the support of being appropriately mirrored from the outside world, although it may appear that way at first, but more importantly from having lost contact with the Essential Identity (Almaas, 1996).

The great betrayal begins with feeling betrayed by those close to us for mirroring and supporting a false existence but at a more fundamental level one realizes that they have betrayed themselves. Almaas (1996) explains:

> So we learned to pretend, to be like them, to join them in their world, the world of lies, the world of the shell, the conventional world. We became what they wanted us to be, what they paid attention to in us, what they preferred in us, what made them relate to us. Through this process of accommodation, we abandoned and rejected what they could not see, the parts of us they did not relate to. Since our essence was the element they recognized or understood least, our essence was the central element we disowned (p. 319).

This experience leaves one feeling great sorrow, regret, shame and guilt, and even self-hatred. The wound is the fact of having betrayed ourselves, sold out in fact, to a mere illusionary self-image. Narcissistic rage is a typical response when defending against this experience. The more one begins to work through these experiences of dis-identifying from the false self structure, the more one is prone to react with rage and "… the situation that most singularly invokes intense narcissistic rage is a loss of or lapse in the mirroring response, and especially the breakdown of any form of mirror transference" (Almaas,

1996, p. 324). Although difficult, the invitation is to witness how rage is an impulsive reaction to feeling wounded and therefore a barrier to further self exploration.

Once the narcissistic wound and rage have been dealt with, a descent into the underlying pain and hurt begins. By accepting the hurt, the wound then expands and deepens, resulting in the dissolution of the empty shell. This process continues until there is no shell and no fundamental wound left. What remains is an awareness of boundless emptiness, a nothingness that expands indefinitely. This emptiness is the complete absence of self-identity but which has characteristics of deficiency, loss of one's centre and orientation, meaninglessness and pointlessness, which is a result of having lost contact with Essential Identity (Almaas, 1996).

Such a decent into emptiness with its associated feelings is a tremendously difficult process. Almaas (1996) describes another typical reaction consisting of feeling inadequate, worthless and unimportant, weak and inferior, almost a complete nothing. Shame becomes the primary feeling. He goes on to say:

> Narcissistic shame is an intense pain related to social failure, failure to be a true human being. It is a sense of being an inferior human being, exposed to social judgment in the midst of severe disintegration of the self. When experienced fully, the effect is very painful (p. 335).

The host of self-judgments and harsh criticisms make shame a narcissistic feature. In dealing with these judgments Almaas (1996) suggests it is a matter of fully understanding and disengaging from the object relation between the empty and false self and that of a rejecting and critical object. He explains this in more detail:

> The self feels empty, lost, and meaningless, and projects on others the image of being critical, harsh, and rejecting of her because she is fake and has failed to be an adequate self. She feels helpless and impoverished … and believes others hate and despise her for feeling this way (p. 335).

The way through this is to recognize and understand that one is merely projecting their own criticisms. The source of misery comes from within; it is one's own doing. This is an opportunity to embrace one's sense of fakeness and emptiness without judgment creating an openness which makes shame less powerful. This is a fundamental step towards self-realization: allowing the experience of emptiness to be "as it is" without judgment (Almaas, 1996).

To settle in deficient emptiness without criticism is to reveal the truth of possessing no sense of self; this sense of deeper acceptance allows the deficient emptiness to transform into inner spaciousness which is vast and peaceful. Almaas (1996) provides a beautiful description of this state:

> We experience ourselves then as a luminous night sky, transparent and pure, light and happy, cool and virginal, deep and peaceful.… It is a nothingness, but it is nothingness that is rich, that is satisfying preciously because of its emptiness. It is a direct sense of endless stillness, of pure peacefulness, of an infinity of blackness that is so black that it is luminous. It is a transparent blackness that is radiant because of its purity. This is not the experience of a self, an observer beholding the endlessness of space; rather, it is the experience of the self experiencing itself *as* the infinity of peaceful space (p. 338).

It is a deep relaxation and surrender into selfless inner spaciousness, which reveals the subtle structure of ego activity not the particular egoic expressions, but more importantly, the activity itself. The ego is facing its own death and thus will begin to intensify its activity as a means for survival. The idea of having to give up the inner ego activity is seen as a defeat resulting in narcissistic depression, a state of "... hopelessness and despair about the possibility of existing authentically, and about receiving support for one's authenticity" (Almaas, 1996, p. 340). Thus, narcissistic depression acts as a filler against being nothing at all.

Release from the incessant activity of the ego attempting to reinvent itself, again, comes through a deep surrender. Surrender at this point is deeper because it requires a deep trust in letting go and allowing a sense of helplessness to surface, and at the same time, embracing a non-doing state. The understanding becomes "... that not knowing what to do in order to be is not a deficiency, for being is not a matter of doing anything" (p. 342). Dropping all ego activity and creating a holding environment where all will be well and taken care of, outside of any personal involvement, is certainly more difficult then it seems. Absolute cessation of ego activity is terrifying, and the self is constantly attempting to identify and rebuild itself to attain an ideal. The ego ideal can never be attained but the self will go to all extremes to do so (Almaas, 1996).

As the barriers to self-realization are explored it becomes clearer that allowing and accepting emptiness plunges one into the dimension of Being, which, after all the narcissistic tendencies have been worked through, reveals the quality of love. It is not a personal kind of love but a universal love. This boundless quality of loving presence,

when maintained assists in ceasing ego activity. It becomes evident that it is this love that acts and not the individual self (Almaas, 1996).

Once ego activity ceases it becomes easier to rest in the experience of selfless openness which allows for the Essential Identity (the point) to emerge. One is now familiar and comfortable with the absence of the separate self. Almaas (1996) illuminates this experience:

> The black space appears as the night sky where the Essential Identity may arise as a brilliant star in the pure darkness. A brilliant point of presence and awareness takes form in the endlessness of space, with the inner recognition: "I am here now".... When one is completely being the Essential Identity, the experience no longer takes the form of being or seeing a point of light. The sense of size disappears, even the feeling of identity disappears.... There is a sense of being alone, without the concept or feeling of aloneness. The aloneness is the perception of oneself as pure, undefiled and uncontaminated. There is lightness and freedom (pp. 345-346).

With all the prior work on transforming one's narcissistic patterns into self-realization this experience becomes obviously clear and simple. Now for the first time the ego is seen from a position outside of itself. One's entire biography becomes transparent, and one begins to see the whole drama of individual existence as if in the third person. Being the Essential Identity reveals all of the self-constructed images, structures, ideals, feelings, plans and hopes in which "There is the sense that the whole personality is there, perceived by a centre of awareness separate from it, but totally compassionate towards it" (Almaas, 1996, p. 347).

However, Almass (1996) warns that the conflict is that possessing the ability to observe the brunt of external influences imposed on the self-structure can, unfortunately, lead to both physical and psychological isolation. A common misunderstanding is that the Essential Identity means a sense of mental autonomy, and social withdrawal, which is not the case at all. One does not need to retreat from the external world.

The resolution of this narcissistic impasse and the loss of the need for any form of mirroring takes place in the process of open inquiry into whatever state one finds oneself in. Whether it be a mundane or luminous state, the invitation is to follow the thread of awareness and allow it to transform into the non-dual presence of self-realization. Through this entire journey there is a sense of "having arrived", and yet, at the same time, having never left. One feels at home, centered and whole, and completely at ease in self-realization (Almaas, 1996).

I will now turn my attention from the transpersonal theorists to explore recent mystic pathways including that of Ramana Maharshi's (1988) "Who Am I;" Osho's (n.d.) "Freedom From Oneself"; Papaji's (1995) "The Truth Is"; and Krishnamurti's (2000) "Choiceless Awareness"

Embracing Mystic Pathways

We create the illusion of escape by pretending that we are separate from the whole. The mystic is one who has seen through this illusionary "I" and is able to transmit his or her wisdom to others. However, the mystic is often both misleading and intimidating to the conditioned self. He or she is one who realizes there is no escape, and

nothing to escape from. The mystic is one who embraces the mystical, and who readily surrenders to the universal unknown. It is within him/her that consciousness expands beyond the ordinary confines of individual existence (Underhill, 2002).

All over the world there have been accounts of identified mystics. A host of historical and more current mystics have helped the world as we know it. They range from historical figures including Gautama the Buddha, Jesus the Christ, and Muhammad to the more recent accounts including Ramana Maharshi, Ramesh Balsekar, Papaji and Osho to name but a few. Their message is that one can become a mystic unto him or herself if he or she so chooses. "Mystical experience is always available---like the divine grace it is---to any who really want it; and all human beings are given in the course of their lives glimpses into the heart of the real which they are free to pursue or forget" (Harvey, 1996, p. x). In the following sections, I provide brief sketches of recent mystics who have ventured onto the path of self-transcendence.

I will begin exploring the mystic path by taking a look at Ramana Maharshi, one of the most well-known and influential non-dual mystics.

Ramana Maharshi's " Who Am I?"

> *The ultimate Truth is so simple, it is*
> *nothing more than being in one's own*
> *natural, original state.*
>
> *(Maharshi, cited in Osborne, 2001, p. 10.)*

Maharshi is one of the greatest and most poignant spiritual mystics of the 20th Century. He was born in 1879 in Tamil Nadu, India. At the age of 17 and without any warning or intention he experienced a radical shift in consciousness. An intense fear of death pierced his psyche but rather than defend against it he surrendered and underwent a pivotal transformation. He realized only the body dies, while consciousness itself is unaffected. Piercing through the illusion of the separate self revealed the underlying nature of the Absolute and thus extinguished the personal fear of death. After such a profound transformation Ramana realized who he was and rested as Absolute Consciousness (Maharshi, 1988). He shares:

> "I" am immortal consciousness. All these were no idle speculations. They went through me like a powerful, living truth that I experienced directly, almost without thinking. 'I' was reality, the only reality in this momentary state. All conscious activity that was related to my body flowed into this 'I.' From that moment, all attention was drawn as if by powerful magic to the 'I' or the 'Self.' The fear of death was permanently extinguished. From this time on I remained fully absorbed in the 'Self' (Maharshi, 1988, pp. xii-xiv).

Ramana realized his essential identity without the need of a formal guru, particular teaching or prescribed spiritual technique. It was a spontaneous deconstruction of the personal sense. He questioned, "Well then, now death is come. What does it mean? This body is dead. It will be carried to the burning ghat and there burned and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am "I" dead? Is this body "I"? (Osborne, 2001, p. 46). For Ramana, death, from the perspective of the Absolute was a concept and appeared

real only through the body-mind identification. Ramana left his worldly life and went into silent seclusion for several years at the holy mountain of Arunachala (Maharshi, 1988).

It was not long before he was discovered and a flock of spiritual seekers sought his guidance. Ramana never founded a new religion or gave formal spiritual instructions or techniques. He did not cater to any religious perspective nor validate one's spiritual achievements. Ramana simply invited seekers to question "Who am I?" This is a process of self-enquiry whereby one radically unveils the notion of personal experience. Osborne (2001), a direct disciple of Ramana Maharshi, states:

> I am not this body which changes but leaves me the same. Nor am I the thoughts that pass through the mind and go out again, leaving me the same. Ten years ago I had thoughts, emotions, aspirations, which are gone now, but I am still the same. What, then, am I? (p. 78).

Through tireless investigation one starts to uproot the firm identifications with bodily existence, the strongly held beliefs, thoughts, and personal experiences, anything temporary, which, thereby, created a more expansive sense of awareness. The question, "Who am I" is similar to a Zen Koan in which one struggles to seek the answer to the question only to find that there is none. We presume there is an "I" to find, but one has never located it. The "I" itself cannot be found. It may appear to exist but appearances are temporal and do not constitute truth. Maharshi (1988) shared, "... Self-inquiry is to focus the entire mind at its Source. It is not, therefore, a case of one "I" searching for another "I" (p. 76). This is not intellectual acrobatics, rather it is a direct experience whether glimpsed or sustained, which allows for a breaking free of confining conditions. Osborne ((2001) states, "Intellectual understanding may be helpful up to a point on one's

quest, but it cannot be the quest" (p. 94). One does engage in certain conditionings, but one is not exclusively identified by them. The purpose of self-inquiry is to become increasingly aware of Being moment-to-moment rather than with becoming, which is always a form of self-projection.

Ramana often redirected questions concerning reincarnation by pushing seekers to "First find out whether you are born now before asking whether you will be reborn." With concerns about the afterlife Ramana would point out, "Why worry what you will be after death before you know what you are now" (Osborne, 2001, p. 159). Ramana continually challenged seekers to realize that which has never changed but has been a constant moment-to-moment, and to witness all else as nothing but mere entertained.

The impact Ramana Maharshi had on the spiritual community has been extraordinary. Transcending all religious and spiritual differences Ramana provided for us the keys to unlock our original nature and end the suffering and illusion of separate existence.

Osho's "Freedom From Oneself"

> *Don't cling with anything. Everything that you cling to is your own imagination. Your gods are your imagination, and your philosophies are your imagination. Existence has no gods, and existence has no philosophies---just a pure silence, but a silence which is musical, a silence which is a dance; a silence which blossoms into many flowers, and into many fragrances; a silence which manifests*

> *into immense varieties; a silence which is multidimensional. Just relax into it. Don't try to believe or trust, because all belief and trust is just clinging.*
>
> *(Osho, n.d., p. 188)*

By far the most influential, radical, "spiritually incorrect" mystic of the 20th Century, Osho (also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) burned all the conventional and contemplative bridges of religion and spirituality and offered an uncompromising, uncensored approach to self-realization. Often paradoxical, misunderstood and controversial, Osho paved a way for seekers to embrace all aspects of life with an intense aliveness, rather than idling in mundane, watered-down concepts and spiritual techniques. He referred to parroting scripture or being sold a "self- improvement plan." From his rebellious youth to his years as a philosopher he enjoyed the mystery of existence celebrating, "It is the mysteriousness of life, it is its unknowability, its unpredictability, that makes it so juicy. If everything becomes predictable, mathematical, logical, life will lose all its glory and splendour" (Osho, n.d., p. 212).

Osho rebelled against all social conditionings and challenged all institutional schools of thought. He spent much of his free moments in quiet seclusion and meditation earnestly seeking freedom from self-identification. At the age of 21, Osho experienced a transformation that shattered his identity and quickly plunged him into the deeper recesses of his being. Out of nowhere and with no intention at all:

> I stopped working on myself.... And the day the search stopped, the day I was not seeking for something, the day I was not expecting something to happen, it started happening. A new energy arose---out of nowhere. It was not coming from any source. It was coming from nowhere and everywhere.... Seven days I lived in a

> very hopeless and helpless state, but at the same time something was arising … I had recognized the fact that I am not---so I cannot depend on myself, I was in an abyss … a bottomless abyss. But there was no fear because there was nothing to protect. There was no fear because there was nobody to be afraid (Osho, 2000, pp. 68-71).

The search ended and rather than embrace the predictable path of "sainthood" Osho developed his own position outside of any traditional lineage, embracing a radical non-dual orientation and becoming controversial with his "methods." He delighted in challenging not only religious leaders but politicians, movie stars, academia and professionals alike. Throughout endless discourses covering all religious and spiritual traditions, Osho regularly encouraged seekers to investigate Truth for themselves rather than rely on dogmatic belief and hearsay. With a series of meditations designed by Osho, many seekers experientially transcended the limitations of the mind and turned further inward, emptying themselves of personal identity (Osho, 2000). To be free of personal identity is to experience the ultimate freedom: the freedom from oneself. He points out:

> As you go deeper in your interiority you suddenly find yourself disappearing into the oceanic consciousness. There is no self as such. You are no more, only existence is…. You have heard about other freedoms, but freedom from oneself is the ultimate freedom---not to be, and allow the existence to express itself in all its spontaneity and grandeur. But it is existence, not you, not me. It is life itself dancing, not you, not me (Osho, n.d., pp. 8-9).

This is the moment when one takes the leap into their own interiority and

dissolves the layers of mind before disappearing into the fathomless nothingness of existence. Osho embraced the wisdom found in paradox: in which being and non-being met, in which every contradiction became transparent, and when one is fully present that they appear almost absent or where they are so absent that they are intensely present. To understand that life itself is nothing more than a grand display of paradoxes is to enter the stream of non-dual wisdom (Osho, n.d.).

To appreciate this it was critical that the individual self be seen as arbitrary, an idea, a reflection and an accumulation of past experiences and therefore transient and illusionary. The ego wants nothing more than to survive. Osho (n.d.) pointed out that it was fear, the fear of "being no-thing," that prevented a return to our fundamental nature. Beyond the mind one is no more, and fear was the ultimate barrier to this realization. He pushed seekers to embrace fear without the judgmental mind which, paradoxically, allowed them to transcend it that, surprisingly, the fear of being nothing was absent. He stresses that one turn towards nothingness and embrace it:

> And once you enter into nothingness, you will be surprised that it is nothing to be afraid of. This is your real home. Now you can celebrate, because there is nothing more than this mystery. That nothingness opens all the doors (n.d., pp. 13-14).

This nothingness is not a negative empty state but more of an overflowing aliveness which is not identified to any form or experience. There is no possibility of defining it. It is boundless and untouched by name or form. It is a stateless state of not-knowing. To arrive at nothingness is to surrender the constructed self; to let go of the individual self sense and its temptations of reinventing itself in the face of nothingness

(Rajneesh, 1977). The key was in deep surrender and relaxation in the eternal present moment:

> Surrender is not something that you can do. If you do it, it is not surrender, because the doer is there. Surrender is a great understanding that "I am not". Surrender is an insight that the ego exists not, that you are not separate. Surrender is not an act but an understanding (Rajnessh, 1977, p. 42).

Surrender must be effortless for it to bridge the gap between the limited mind and the vastness of nothingness. Surrender is the path to nothingness and it happens on its own. It is a realization of what one is not and a return to the unqualified dimension of nothingness.

Osho fearlessly embraced this process and often laughed at the concerns expressed by those who were close to him, stating, "Only that which cannot be taken away by death is real. Everything else is unreal, it is made of the same stuff dreams are made of" (Osho, 2000, p. 142).

Papaji's "The Truth Is"

> *This present Moment is Light, is Self*
>
> *This Moment is not bondage or freedom.*
>
> *It is most precious beyond ideation.*
>
> *This Moment is the screen on which all projects.*
>
> *It is always Still and Untouched and it is out of time.*
>
> *There is no difference between the Ultimate and this Presence.*

To be in this Moment abandon all desires,

including the desire to be in it.

(*Papaji, 1995, pp. 25-26)*

Hariwansh Lal Poonja or "Papaji" was born in India and was a direct disciple of Ramana Maharshi. Like Ramana, Papaji had his first taste of non-dualism at a young age. The spontaneous nature of this emergence pointed to the absence of any form of individual effort or cause-and-effect relationship. Papaji developed the understanding of the timeless nature of the Self and would often laugh at all attempts made at acquiring or attaining enlightenment. He maintained that there was no effort needed in Being; all forms of seeking are only entertainment for the mind, which simply takes one away from their true nature (Goodman, 1998). In response to a seeker's comment about the necessity of following a spiritual path for the benefit of self-realization, Papaji replied:

> You don't have to do any practice. You don't have to chant any mantras. You don't have to do any yogic *asanas,* [physical postures] and you don't have to go on any pilgrimages. You simply have to look within at your own Self. In no time at all you will see that you have been always free, but you didn't realize it before because you were always looking outwards (Goodmen, 1998, p. 62).

Freedom was found in the moment and Papaji embraced this while, at the same time, directed seekers to this simple truth. Papaji was known for "calling off the search" and resting in present moment Awareness. His responses to seekers contained the same message that the moment is all there is and no-thing could effect or change it in any way. What appears and disappears is an illusion of the mind. The only way to experience this

is to surrender the judgmental mind and fall into Silence. There is freedom beyond any state of mind (Goodmen, 1998).

Fear is the only predicament. Fear of losing one's world is the primary barrier to the Wholeness. The fear of being nothing; of possessing no name of form of any kind, of being empty is terrifying. The mind has subtle ways of defending against this fear and goes to great lengths to maintain its existence. Papaji knew this and would tear apart every strategy the mind had in self-identification and leave no avenue of escape. No one attending his *satsang* was consoled. Papaji was soon referred to as the "Lion of Lucknow" and was unpredictable, reflecting whatever was needed in the moment, whether it is tender kindness or fierce intensity; he made no deals with anyone. Papaji would challenge seekers to face their fear by "taking the jump" into themselves and risking it all, giving up the idea of individuality and returning to Self (Papaji, 1993).

Before his death, he said wake up and celebrate that you are already home and that "Nothing ever existed is the Ultimate Truth".

Krishnamurti's "Choiceless Awareness"

> *A man who sees things very clearly (not neurotically or obstinately) does not choose. So choice, will, resistance---the "me" in action---is wastage of energy.... When I look at "what is" in myself and in the world, without resistance, then out of that observation there is instant action which is not the result of will.*
>
> *(Krishnamurti, 1976, pp. 333-335)*

Jiddu Krishnamurti was groomed by theosophist Annie Besant for the role of "World Teacher," that is, one who would possess the ability to transmit Absolute Truth. Krishnamurti renounced this position seeing it as another form of dualism. He rejected all traditional forms of spiritual seeking. All paths led one further away from what is already available to each of us within the moment. Awareness is all there is (Krishnamurti, 1976).

As Krishnamurti (2000) taught in order to open up to the pregnant moment of awareness one must understand how to become available to it. The need to define ourselves as an individual through fleeting desires, goals, routines and repetitions, and pursuits of future happiness pulls us away from living in the present moment. He emphasized the importance of penetrating into that which shatters our sense of individuality and plunges us into a new reality beyond our identified separate selves.

> Life is a matter of relationship; and to understand that relationship, which is not static, there must be an awareness which is pliable, an awareness which is alertly passive, not aggressively active.... This passive awareness does not come through any form of discipline, through any practice. It is to be just aware, from moment to moment (Krishnamurti, 1954, p. 98).

Again, he rejected all techniques prescribed by other mystics and spiritual teachers, stating they were an embellished mind game, another form of conditioning: "spiritual conditioning." In fact, this was another defence against surrendering the separate self. He stated we are conditioned to believe and rely on accumulated experiences, which are always based in time. To understand the infinite one must realize that "Reality is not a thing which is knowable by the mind" (Krishnamurti, 1969, p.98). The finite mind cannot comprehend infinite reality. Krishnamurti was pointing to

something existing within everyone and accessible through surrendering self-contracted conditions and resting in background awareness.

He suggested that simply becoming a witness to the moment brings about a shift in perception and creates an atmosphere of openness. He suggest, "Watch yourself without any identification, without any comparison, without any condemnation; just watch, and you will see an extraordinary thing taking place" (Kirshnamurti, 1954, p. 95). Rather than engaging in intellectual jargon in which exchanges of opinions are simply presented and the actuality of present awareness is overlooked, one is invited to explore this understanding and experience the witness behind the limited separate self.

The understanding Krishnamurti presented was to become consistently aware within the moment, to rest in ever present awareness without judging or condemning whatever the moment presents. Our pattern to defend against the moment is based upon likes and dislikes, which blinds us to being fully aware. The conditioned mind struggles in the face of impermanence, the unknown, and will continuously grab at that which is familiar in order to continue defining itself and maintaining its existence (Krishnamurti, 1970, p. 81).

Suffering is created when there is conflict between "what is" and with what we deem "should be." Conflict is the denial of "what is" and we avoid it through the creation of thought, which splits us into the past or projected future. When faced with the moment we make choices based on what has worked in the past, which keeps us from working with what is. Krishnamurti (1954) asserted, "What is important, surely, is to be aware without choice, because choice brings about conflict "(p. 97). If we could look within the moment with fresh eyes rather than conditioned ones, we could break free from the

confines and limitations of our fragmented existence and step into the beyond. Choiceless awareness was Krishnamurti's (2000) core understanding:

> Choiceless awareness implies to be aware both objectively, outside and inwardly, without any choice. Just to be aware of the colors, of this tent, of the tress, the mountains, nature---just to be aware. Not choose, say "I like this," "I don't like that," or "I want this", "I don't want that." To observe without the observer. The observer is the past, who is conditioned, therefore, he is always looking from that conditioned point of view, so there is like and dislike, my race, your race, my God, your God, and all the rest of it. We are saying to be aware implies to observe the whole environment around you, the mountains, the tress, the ugly wars, the towns, to be aware, to look at it. And in that observation there is no decision, no will, no choice (p. 73).

Choicelessness allows for experiencing what is without the interfering mind. Suffering results from judgments and expectations. He pointed out that peace is always presently alive within the moment and to deny it is to prevent free-flowing existence. The more we allow life to unfold and reveal itself as it is, without choice, the more we can begin to give up control and to trust and relax into the aliveness of the unknown. In doing so "... life has an astonishing way of taking care of you.... Life carries you where it will because you are part of itself..." (Krishnamurti, 1970, p. 158). If we would simply get out of our own way we could begin to sense the ease of effortlessly being present in the moment. In being choicelessly aware we can see how we are not separate from the whole of life, rather we are lived and carried by life.

At times confrontational, Krishnamurti challenged those around him to confront their existence and challenged adopted notions of reality. He never assumed the role of guru nor collected disciples or formulated a specific teaching, he simply invited seekers to question the obvious: to question the very foundation that constitutes an individual self.

Summary

This chapter provides a review of the literature beginning with a description of the perennial philosophy, a vision inherent in most spiritual and religious traditions. It described the Great Chain of Being beginning with the level of Matter, which is nothing more than the physical external universe, followed by that of our biological Body and our conceptual Minds, and ending with Soul and Spirit, which are states beyond the separate self that house the essence of our own beings and the Absolute non-dual nature of reality.

I then explored the school of transpersonal psychology and how it applies to transcendent spiritual experiences encountered along the journey towards Wholeness. I examined two different developmental models of consciousness. Wilber's (1977, 1999a) Spectrum of Consciousness is a map that integrates Western and Eastern schools of conventional and contemplative development and allows for a closer investigation of the unfolding nature of human consciousness. Specifically, the three stages of pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal with their corresponding levels were described including potential pathologies existing at each level. Secondly, I looked at Almaas (1986; 1988; 1996) and his Diamond Mind Approach, which combines facets of depth psychology

with those elements of ego psychology and object relations, and applies these to deeper levels of human consciousness that extend beyond ego self-awareness.

Finally, I provided a brief description of the contributions of four of the world's most influential non-dual mystics and their journey towards Wholeness. In the next section I will discuss the research approach and methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Approach to Research

This chapter will examine the research methodology process of the study. I will begin by exploring the overall approach to this research study by considering phenomenological hermeneutics and narrative aspects and how they are applicable to the unfolding research. I will then examine Wilber's (2001) three different modes of knowing which will help lay the foundation for alternative paradigms outside of the traditional dominant discourse of empirical science. Next I will explore the research process with respect to the selection of co-researchers, the interview format and procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

I must reiterate that I am implicated in this research, so much so, that several co-researchers viewed me as a tenth co-researcher rather than simply a researcher. My own passion for the journey towards Wholeness is the primary motivation for this study and several co-researchers' commented on my intensity for and commitment to the study.

Now let me turn our attention to the human sciences research paradigm with a particularly to the use of phenomenological hermeneutics to approach and better understand the research findings.

A Human Sciences Investigation

A phenomenological-hermeneutic research approach was used with each co-researcher in investigating their journey towards Wholeness. A number of individuals in the counselling field (Maslow, 1968; Osborne, 1990; Rogers, 1980) view traditional quantitative research methods as inadequate for capturing the full experience of the subject being investigated. They call for an expanded method of research moving beyond the paradigm of the natural sciences and embracing a human science one.

When defining the term human science, Polkinghorne (1983) states, "At the broadest level, the human sciences investigates all of the experiences, activities, constructs, and artifacts that would not now exist, or would not ever have existed, if human beings had not existed" (p. 289). It is an exploration into all human experiences as they present themselves. Further, Eckartsberg (1998) stated that traditional scientific approaches view their subjects from a distance, objectively, as simple biological organisms. They employ a battery of statistical methods to measure the cause and effect relationships in human experiences which at best only explain human behaviour. The human sciences researcher, on the other hand, connects and engages with their subject in an attempt to explore the constructed meanings behind human experiences. Traditional psychological research resorts "... to quantitative, mechanistic, and computer models of human nature that ... record various regularities of behaviour and make predictions and, at worst, do violence to our forms of self-understanding" (Eckaretsberg, 1998, p. 4). The human science movement is an approach that sets aside the reductionistic, cemented view

of observing, measuring and recording human experiences through numbers and begins to participate and attend to the actual lived experience.

The human sciences approach is an appropriate fit for the present study because of what Van Hesteren (1986) calls a built-in quest orientation:

> I have become convinced that the most fundamental and pervasive quality of "being" required by human science research is what can metaphorically be described as a quest orientation … this orientation in the present context is essentially characterized by an open-minded, broad-horizontal perspective on self in the world, a need to question and to explore the unfamiliar, and a strong motive force to confront and to work through existential issues and questions of meaning (p. 211).

The researcher approaches their research by assuming a questing orientation, being open to the experience presented, and continuously adopting the stance of a "perpetual beginner." By doing so, the researcher becomes vulnerable and self-reflective, questioning his or her solidified world view. Personal beliefs, values, and morals are challenged resulting in an openness to all experiences and potential transformation (Van Hesteren, 1986).

As a developing counsellor I found Osborne's (1990) work appropriate for this type of research. He observed that phenomenological hermeneutic research requires that the researcher possess skills and personality traits which match those of counsellors in the field. Researchers employing a person-centered theoretical orientation are regarded as valuable assets when doing human science research as they themselves have encountered and begun a personal journey in working through their own questions of meaning.

Now that we have a broad overview of what it means to truly embrace a human sciences approach when doing qualitative research, I will now consider, in more depth, the applications of phenomenology and hermeneutics.

The Study of Phenomenology

A turn away from Cartesian dualistic methodologies to that of phenomenology is needed when approaching this topic. The application of phenomenological methodologies is essential because it allows the research to be grounded in the co-researchers' lived experiences. As Jardine (1990) illustrated, the problem with the Cartesian worldview is that it proposes a severance from the world of experiences as we have come to know it: in order to understand or study an experience we must not only disconnect ourselves from the experience itself but also disconnect the experience from other familiar experiences to make it an isolated object of study. We begin to lose the essence of the experience. He states:

> As we sever our connections with the Earth, it ceases to be our abode and becomes a meaningless objective mechanism which is at the disposal of our whim consumptive fantasies. And, correlatively, as the earth loses its *humus*, its living, generative character, the subject loses its humanity by losing the connectedness with the humus out of which it emerged. One might say that the subject loses its humility, its Being-in-the-world, its sense of having a place on Earth, and becomes … a disembodied and wordless self-presence to which the earth must submit (pp. 214-215).

Phenomenology then embraces the already existing connectedness shared in every experience. Husserl (1977), generally considered to be the founder of modern phenomenology, described it as a turn "unto the things themselves", a return to the things of the world as they are presented in any given experience. He viewed phenomenology as the answer to embracing a radically genuine science of ontology. He developed phenomenology as a means of describing the human experience as it presents itself to the researcher. Merleau-Ponty (1962) summarized phenomenology as:

> [T]he study of essences; ... the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins---as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status (p. vii).

It is the study of lived experiences as they spontaneously manifest themselves in their environment before personal reflection can even begin. Approaching this particular study from a position of already being connected to the journey towards Wholeness was essential in order to capture the co-researchers' lived experiences. This allows for the exploration of the similarities of experience shared by all co-researchers.

One of the central principles of Husserlian (1977) phenomenology is the notion of intentionality, or what he called "life-world". This is the idea that consciousness is always intentional, that is, it is always conscious of something. Osborne (1990) explained that even when we think we are not conscious of anything we are, in fact, conscious of not being conscious of anything. In order to get back "unto the things themselves", Sass (1988) described Husserl's phenomenological reduction or "bracketing" as an attempt to remove all personal concepts, theories and beliefs in order to present an unbiased description of the experience as it presents itself phenomenally. This, he assumed, would allow for total self-transparency where one could become a witness, as such, or "transcendental ego" to describe the essence of any experience as it presents itself.

> The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me---this world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, from me as the transcendental Ego... (cited in Sass, 1988, p. 236).

This is the foundation from which all possible experiences emerge. However, Heidegger (1962) points out that because we are already "being-in-the-world" we can never fully bracket off all of our prejudices. Rich (2005) noted the main difference between Heidegger and Husserl, is that where Husserl focuses on describing the essence of any experience from a position of a self-transparent witness, Heidegger searches for the meaning behind the experience as it has been influenced by historical and cultural traditions. One cannot be completely transparent as to not influence or already bring a set

of experiences to the experience being investigated. A move towards hermeneutics is needed to clarify these apparent differences.

A Hermeneutical Refinement

In order to interpret and present the phenomenon experienced on the journey towards Wholeness, a hermeneutical refinement of the phenomenological approach is needed. Hermeneutics is another alternative to the natural sciences and refers to a process of interpreting the phenomenon, the lived experience expressed through the use of speech, writing, or art for the purpose of uncovering and reconstructing the meaning of phenomenon (Chessick, 1990; Gadamer, 1989; Van Hesteren, 1986).

Heidegger's (1962) main reaction to Husserlian phenomenology was to the notion of the ground of all experiences: the transcendental ego. He stressed it is impossible to extract fixed essences from phenomenon as a self-transparent witness because, fundamentally, we are always "being-in-the-world". There is no actual division between subject and object, between an inner and an outer realm, or between essence and existence. The world appears to one through the expression of consciousness from which one constructs personal meanings. As such, one comes to realize that we are of the world, interconnected in many ways, rather than distinct objects roaming independently through it. Since we are always interconnected with the world at any given moment, hermeneutics is a method that provides an opportunity to interpret our experiences from a position of interconnectedness rather than from a position of disengaged self-transparency.

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation and occurs through the use of language, which is a shared aspect of understanding (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger (1962) considered both language and understanding to be essential elements of being. Human knowledge is an act of interpretation because it is always based on historical-cultural contexts. Every experience we have is based on our previous understandings, and meanings we associate with these experiences are a reflection of our personal biases. Again, we can never fully bracket off all our pre-existing concepts and understandings from any experience that presents itself to us.

Chessick (1990) points out that according to Gadamer, conversation and openness become essential ingredients in the hermeneutical approach. Self-knowledge is not freely chosen by us but rather it is deeply embedded in our culture and history, with what Gadamer calls our prejudices. Thus, we can only begin to understand ourselves through our familial and societal connections; we can never arrive at a final truth because "the sociohistorical vantage point [our prejudices] that we are all born into when we acquire language … constantly changes, there is no such thing as final knowledge or absolute truth …" (p. 262). Thus, one should avoid such endless pursuits.

Engaging in the dialogical nature of hermeneutics coupled with uninterrupted listening (Chessick, 1990) the hidden meaning of the experience to reveal itself before us. An atmosphere of self-forgetfulness is created when we, as researchers, give ourselves over to the voice of our co-researcher (Nixon, 1992). Additionally, it also allows the co-researchers' stories to challenge us: to generate both confusion and new understanding. However, there is a risk involved because hermeneutics "… requires of the researcher a readiness and a willingness to grow as a person by constructively confronting and

working through experiences that may result in transformations of his or her understanding of self and the world" (Van Hestern, 1986, p. 212). We must risk potentially becoming transformed through our engagement with our co-researchers when extracting and interpreting meaning from their lived experiences on the journey.

This research utilizes a hermeneutical approach in order to look at aspects of the journey towards Wholeness. I will now consider the narrative aspects of this research.

Narrative Aspects within Phenomenological Hermeneutics

The stories of the co-researchers are central to this research and therefore narrative research needs to be considered. According to Cochrane (1985; 1986), stories are critical elements of lived experiences due to the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future, which create an on-going narrative.

To uncover the meanings hidden within the co-researchers' narrative stories, the use of language becomes paramount. Language becomes the avenue of expressing meaning through story (Corey, 2001). When we allow the co-researchers to share their stories, to share their journey with all of their interconnections, understandings, theorizing, and ambiguities, we are, in fact, honouring their experiences. This creates an atmosphere of openness in which, we explore what each co-researcher's story is pointing to or describing about the journey towards Wholeness.

Narrative research employs a collaborative approach which parallels that of a counselling relationship in that there is an ongoing relationship taking place. Osborne (1990) encourages for a close encounter to emerge between that of the researcher and co-

researchers. An encounter based on equality and connectedness created a level of trust whereby I, the researcher, was allowed access into their lived experiences.

The qualities and skills needed in person-centered counselling (Rogers, 1961) were adopted within an unstructured interview format. I used such skills as empathic reflection of feeling and meaning, paraphrasing, and open-ended and closed questions which assisted in teasing out the themes in the co-researchers' stories. Interviews were arranged between myself and each of the co-researchers. Also, field notes were taken, transcripts were made of each interview, and meetings, either in person, over the phone or via email, were made for further discussion and clarification of each interview, which all became part of the narrative record.

Considering the Fecundity of the Individual Case

We must consider the fecundity of the individual case, which, in its own view, moves beyond the collection of phenomenological descriptions of the shared themes within the co-researchers' stories to that of embracing the fecund experiences of the individual story. Gadamer (1975) explains this concept further:

> The individual case on which judgment works is never simply a case; it is not exhausted by being a particular example of a universal law or concept. Rather, it is always an "individual case", and it is significant that we call it a special case, because the rule does not comprehend it. Every judgment about something that is intended to be understood in its concrete individuality ... is---strictly speaking---a judgement about a special case. That means simply that the evaluation of the case

> does not merely apply the measure of the universal principle according to which it is judged, but itself co-determines it, supplements and corrects it (p. 37).

It is in those moments which catch our attention that real understanding can begin to take place (Gadamer, 1975). Nixon (1992) states "The way we are taken back by an instance calls for understanding. This may be the unanticipated mixture of significance and familiarity erupting in the midst of a new situation" (p. 107). Those experiences that astound us, that have us take a step back, calls for our attention. We can see the fecundity of the individual case in the lives of Ramana Maharshi, Osho, Papjai, and Krishnamurti.

This relates to the themes from the co-researchers' stories because it deals with those one or two particular experiences that stand outside of the general rule of understanding. For example, this was exemplified in the major theme: *a turbulent encounter with ourselves*, where two co-researchers addressed, in a sub-theme *the rot of spirituality*. This was unique in that this theme described movement away from the often celebrated pursuits in the journey towards Wholeness and called into question the need to acknowledge psycho-spiritual turmoil.

Now I will turn my attention to the work of Wilber (2001) and his three modes of knowing when extracting information about the self in relationship to personal and transcendent phenomenal realities.

Issues in researching the eye of Spirit

Several co-researchers reported transcendental states of consciousness along the journey towards Wholeness. The following is a description of how individuals access

different levels of consciousness, and how these experiences are confirmed using the three basic strands of knowledge.

There are three nodes or "three eyes" of knowing used in observing and extracting knowledge about the nature and movement of the personal and transcendent self in its relation to the world. The gross, subtle, and causal levels of consciousness can be accurately investigated employing the eye of flesh, which is used in perceiving the external world in its conventional modes of space, time, and object constancy. The eye of reason (or mind) is used in the world of philosophy, knowledge, and logic. The eye of contemplation is used when one moves beyond the levels of flesh and mind and plunges into the depths of knowledge of higher transcendent conscious realities (Wilber, 1996a; 2001).

The eye of flesh is the first and simplest route in looking at the concrete world, which appears to be composed of separate distinct objects. It is an experience shared, to some extent, with those that possess this function (including animals) utilizing the basic capabilities of sensorimotor intelligence. The eye of flesh is the "empirical eye" capable of detecting sensory experience using the five senses. In this gross realm of material existence objects are substantial in themselves. Knowledge is gathered through the senses and studied through the use of empirical and analytic tools (Wilber, 2001).

The eye of reason or more generally stated, the eye of mind, interacts in the world of ideas, images, concepts and logic. A process of integration occurs when the eye of mind transcends and includes the empirical eye of flesh. The eye of mind goes beyond the sensory world and can now envision: create mental pictures of objects that are not necessarily present in the material world, and control sensorimotor instinctual and

impulsive drives. We not only "see" with our eyes but we can also see a world invisible to our naked eye. When research is aimed at studying others, phenomenological hermeneutics is used (Wilber, 2001).

The eye of contemplation transcends the world of mental reason just as the eye of mind transcends the eye of flesh. In this realm, there is transrational, translogical, and transmental activity. This is the experience of the mystic who has transcended the conventional notions of time, space, matter, and mind; where the Self has now turned on itself revealing Consciousness, which is Reality. This is a contemplative realm in which philosophical reason and sensory experiences have no definitive role. Knowledge of transpersonal states of consciousness is conceptualized in a paradoxical manner.

Wilber (2001) describes how each of the three eyes of knowing have access to data in each of their respective realms. There are three strands used to confirm data validity. The three basic strands are:

1. Instrumental injunction. This is a set of instructions to follow. For example, in order to experience higher states of consciousness, you have to meditate.
2. Intuitive apprehension. This is cognitive understanding. It is the immediate experience of the object domain (or aspect of the object domain) addressed by the injunction; that is, the immediate data-apprehension.
3. Communal confirmation. This is a checking of the results with others who have completed the injunctive and apprehensive strands.

Wilber (2001) turns to Zen as an example of how the three strands are applied to the accumulation and verification of transcendental data. Zazen [sitting meditation] is the injunctive strand, in which, "If you want to know whether there is Buddha Nature, you

must first do this" (p. 55). The second strand is that of intuitive apprehension of transcendental data, which is disclosed by the injunction [zazen]. This intuitive apprehension is known in Zen as a *satori* or "a direct seeing into one's spiritual nature" (p. 55). This is beyond sensory and mental understanding. It is the eye of contemplation. The third strand consists of a confirmation of experiences. In Zen, the individual's apprehensions of transcendental states are put to the test. An intense interaction with the Zen Master (*dokusan*) and public tests of authenticity (*shosan*) are the tools used for transcendental data verification.

The inclusion of Wilber's (2001) three eyes is useful in this research. It offers an explanation of how people possess different ways of knowing when attempting to understand themselves in relation to personal and transcendent realities. It also provides a process to test and verify transpersonal states of consciousness. The next section outlines the research procedure including the selection of co-researchers, interview format, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Research Procedure

Selection of Co-researchers

I followed Osborne's (1990) invitation for researchers to replace the term "subject" with "co-researcher" as it implies a mutual cooperative engagement between the researcher and co-researcher rather than a removed "us" and "them" position. Each of the selected co-researchers met certain criteria in order to become co-researchers in this

study. Co-researchers had journeyed the path towards Wholeness for a minimum of two years and were able to identify and articulate their experiences during interview sessions. There were a few qualities that I looked for in the co-researchers. Foremost, I looked for prospective co-researchers who strongly identified themselves as having been on a journey mixed with qualities of excitement, passion, and intensity for the journey. I also felt it was important that the prospective co-researcher have some familiarity with the literature on the journey, and a strong desire to share their experiences. Naturally, the selected co-researchers presented various paths leading towards Wholeness, but it is the common themes, which emerge in each co-researcher's verbal description that I wished to explore.

There were nine co-researchers who met the research criteria. An advertisement was published in selected newspapers and magazines (see Appendix A) to recruit co-researchers.

An initial screening process was used with each prospective co-researcher. I compiled a list of questions that I asked during the screening process which focused on the length of their journey and their abilities to provide a description of their experiences encountered along their journey as a means of determining appropriateness. A letter of consent (see Appendix B) was read and completed by each co-researcher with the understanding and agreement that each interview session would be taped and transcribed. Each co-researcher was identified using a pseudonym they selected for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality. The co-researcher was informed that the data would only be seen by this writer, a research assistant and thesis supervisor. Transcriptions were made available to each co-researcher. Contact numbers for each co-researcher were collected

not only for the distribution of transcriptions but also for potential clarification of collected data.

Interview Format

After each co-researcher was selected I interviewed each of them separately, which typically took about one and half to two hours. I conducted the interviews in a comfortable setting of their choice. I used a person-centered theoretical orientation as suggested by Osborne (1990) to capture the lived journey experienced by each co-researcher. I utilized an empathic and non-judgmental approach, which appeared to help co-researchers feel at ease in sharing their story with me. They seemed to value my involvement and regarded me as more than just a researcher, but as a fellow co-researcher in the journey towards Wholeness.

Finally, once the interviews were transcribed I contacted each co-researcher, provided them with a copy of the transcriptions, and gave them an opportunity to discuss the transcripts and share their experiences as a co-researcher. All of the co-researchers were satisfied with the quality of their transcriptions and did not feel the need to add or delete any information.

I used a written journal to describe my personal experiences with each co-researcher. Several insights and transformational experiences occurred with a few co-researchers who were operating at different levels of consciousness. This data was used to support some of the emerging themes discussed in Chapter Four.

Before I turn to the themes in Chapter Four, I will consider the analysis of the data compiled in the interviews and how ethical issues were approached.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and all identifying information was deleted. All co-researchers were provided with a copy of the transcription for the purpose of correcting or expanding on particular issues they felt were relevant to their story.

In addition to the taped transcriptions and journal entries, I made notes during each interview and used them when expanding on a particular experience for the benefit of presenting a rich description of the emerging phenomenon. All the co-researchers understood that the recorded data would be destroyed after the data analysis was completed.

During data analysis I followed Osborne's (1990) suggestions by reading and re-reading the transcribed narratives of each co-researcher in order to become familiar with their stories. From there I generated a list of surface themes by interpreting the meaning of each sentence within the interviews. Next I began to compare the interviews and noticed certain thematic similarities which opened the door for an exploration of the deeper meanings. I clustered the shared thematic commonalities in order to get a richer, more in-depth theme that would serve to illuminate the essence of the particular experience shared by the co-researchers. Osborne (1990) explains:

> [Now]The researcher's focus is upon the deep structure of meaning rather than surface linguistic structure. A skilled phenomenological researcher "reads

between the lines" as he or she looks for deep structures which characterize the phenomenon in much the same way that a Jungian or Freudian analyst seeks to unearth archetypal or oedipal structures (p. 85).

Fundamentally it is the shared structural data between the co-researchers that is important to capture. Once I had a list of the deeper themes I was able to present the data in a written descriptive narrative.

Ethical Considerations

A primary ethical consideration is co-researcher confidentiality. The co-researchers were required to sign a letter of consent (see Appendix B) before the interview proceeded and I answered any questions the co-researcher had. The consent form outlined a) the purpose of the study, and b) the requirements and time commitment required during participation in the study, and c) the voluntary nature of the study. The use of self-selected pseudonyms and the omission of any revealing information are critical in establishing confidentiality. Co-researchers were given the opportunity to review their transcriptions and remove any data they felt was personally identifiable.

Being interviewed placed the co-researcher in a potentially vulnerable position, feeling exposed and opened to personal exploration. There was the potential for co-researchers to become overwhelmed in sharing their story and I pointed this possibility out before beginning the interview. I emphasised the voluntary nature of the research as outlined in the letter of consent and reminded them that they could discontinue the

interview at any time should he or she choose to do so. Thankfully, no such experience presented itself during this study.

Summary

This chapter described the methodological approach to this research. I began by turning away from the natural sciences position of objectivity and embraced a phenomenological-hermeneutics stance under the umbrella of human sciences. I provided a description of how the study of phenomenology fits with this type of research. I included a hermeneutical refinement which challenges the notion of a purely subjective transcendental ego and points to how we bring a set of biases to every experience being investigated. I also considered narrative applications with a phenomenological hermeneutics context and explored the fecundity of the individual case. Next, in the spirit of phenomenological hermeneutics, I described how information about personal and transcendent realities is extracted by outlining the "three eyes of knowing": the eye of flesh, eye of reason, and eye of spirit. I described the process of selecting each co-researcher, outlined the interview format described how data were collected and analyzed, and explored ethical considerations.

Let us now explore the co-researchers' themes that emerged from the interviews about the journey towards Wholeness.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE THEMES OF THE CO-RESEARCHERS' JOURNEYS

Introduction to the Co-researchers

This chapter will address the emerging themes within each co-researchers journey towards Wholeness. It will be important to have a brief sketch of each co-researcher before investigating each theme to allow the reader to have a clearer idea of who is making each statement.

The youngest co-researcher, Naomi, grew up and was educated in Vancouver B.C. Concerned about global environmental issues, she spent time working for a small environmental newspaper with a determination to influence significant social change in her community. However, she was met with a variety of corporate "hidden agendas" within her work place which conflicted with her vision. As a teenager, Naomi battled turbulent feelings of disconnection and isolation from the world around her. Relationships became a temporary means of solace. After four engagements and feeling discouraged at work, Naomi turned to spirituality and began exploring psychic phenomena. She then became engaged in Buddhist practices before attending *satsangs* with non-dual teachers. Currently, Naomi is in a loving marriage with another co-researcher, Mark, and together they share two beautiful children. Naomi is now in her mid thirties.

Mark spent his university days studying economics, politics and philosophy before becoming intrigued by the teachings of Krishnamurti and departing on his own journey towards Wholeness in the early 1970's. After university he traveled extensively

through Africa, Europe and India and was exposed to non-dualism through the teachings of Nisargadatta Maharaj. Mark intensified his search through rigorous meditations and attending several Buddhist retreats. He met his partner, Naomi, in the spiritual community and they share a love for the journey. He currently works as an addictions counsellor and facilitates his own meditation retreats. Mark is in his late thirties.

Nancy embarked on a law career as a civil litigator and was very successful. She maintained a lifestyle filled with prestige and status for a period of ten years. In her thirties, Nancy felt bored and unfulfilled with her profession. Having suffered a disastrous marriage and succumbed to heavy drug abuse and promiscuity, she turned to spirituality as a means of filling the void. She spent eighteen months intensely exploring the core of non-daulism while attending numerous *satsangs,* living in a spiritual community in India, and even working directly with non-dual teachers including Adyashanti and Toni Parsons. Feeling frustrated with the "spiritual elitism" of seekers, Nancy limited her practices to those teachers she felt deeply connected with. Similar to Naomi and Mark, Nancy met her partner Dan, another co-researcher, within the spiritual community. Currently, she lives with her partner and daughter from a previous marriage, and works in palliative care. Nancy is in her early forties.

Dan grew up in Ireland as a practicing Catholic. As a young child he was drawn to spirituality and the core meaning of Christ. It was not until the death of his first wife that Dan's search stretched to a new level of earnestness and intensity while, grieving the loss, Dan attended local alternative healing workshops before becoming exposed to non-dualism through the teachings of Toni Parsons and Hariwansh Lal Poonja, also known as Papaji. After meeting Nancy in the spiritual community in India he moved to Canada and

established a local *satsang* community webpage. He is passionately drawn to the spiritual search and together, with Nancy, organizes community *satsangs* with visiting teachers. Dan is in his mid forties.

Jason moved from Eastern Canada to Vancouver B.C. in his early twenties. Upon arrival he made several friends who later introduced him to the teachings of Zen. Inspired, Jason was able to develop a small meditative practice while working in the business industry. He met his partner in his late twenties and together they moved to Edmonton, Alberta to be closer to relatives and to begin a family of their own. However, in his early thirties tragedy struck his partner and Jason was left in turmoil as a single parent. The death of his partner thrust him into a more pronounced spiritual journey. He moved back to Vancouver B.C. with his children and began studying psychology and applied counselling courses. Jason recently completed his Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology and works for an employee assistance program. He is now in his late thirties.

Born in a small village in England, Sean described himself as a quiet child who usually kept to himself. At the age of ten his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died within the year. Based on decisions made by his family, Sean moved to Vancouver B.C. to live with his aunt. He described this as a time of deep suffering. Sean has never met his biological father and struggled with this for a period of time. As a teen he was fascinated with his new surroundings and slowly immersed himself in occult literature, and dabbled in psychedelic drugs before seriously exploring Zen meditation. For several years he was deeply involved in the Tai Chi Society and attended numerous men's support groups before becoming interested in non-dual teachings. He attended

university and currently works as a Landscape Designer. Sean has been happily married for 25 years and is now in his late forties.

Mike described living a relatively normal structured life. Throughout high school and well into his adulthood he indicated he had a thirst for spirituality and mystical literature. Throughout his twenties he experimented with meditation and began having experiences beyond ordinary ego awareness. After attending his first *satsang* with Pamela Wilson two and half years ago, his search intensified. Mike mixed his interests in mysticism with business, and together with his partner, he maintained a successful business operating a bookstore that carries mystical literature. He continues to share a love for non-dual teachings and holds *satsangs* for visiting teachers at his store. Mike is now in his late forties.

Randal did well academically but felt academia was limited when it came to psycho-spiritual development. He spent his teenage and early adulthood years practicing and studying psychic phenomena. Although members of his family have experienced psychic phenomena in their own lives it was a topic too taboo to speak openly about. A career in the arts, particularly with oil painting, became a passion for Randal. This was his avenue for self-expression. He also met his wife in the spiritual community and together they traveled to India, spending time in ashrams before returning to Vancouver B.C. Randal devotes a majority of his time to painting and meditation. He is now in his late forties.

The last co-researcher, Alan, was born in England and moved to Canada with his family as a young child. As an adult Alan found successful work in the construction business. He reported having no interest in spirituality as a teenager or young adult. Due

to a combination of addiction and the shocking death of his wife in 1989, Alan recognized the need for a drastic life change and spirituality appeared to be the answer. He traveled throughout the United States attending workshops and *satsangs* before traveling back and forth to India visiting with Papaji. He was deeply drawn to the core teachings of Advaita Vedanta [non-dualism]. Because of his spiritual pursuits Alan found little acceptance amongst his family, especially with his father and brother. After Papaji's death in 1997 he made a home for himself in Vancouver B.C. and is currently in the process of moving to the United States. Alan is now in his early fifties.

This was a brief introduction to the nine co-researchers on the journey towards Wholeness. I will now consider the themes which emerged out of their stories.

Vulnerable Beginnings

> *And why do people remain closed? – they are afraid, afraid of being open, because when you are open you are insecure, unguarded. When you are open you are vulnerable. When you are open you don't know what is going to happen, everything is a surprise. You are moving into the unknown; each moment brings the unknown to your door.*
>
> *(Osho, n.d., p. 36)*

Beginning a journey of such transformation occurs when our psychological defences are dropped and we begin to have a taste of "what is" in the present moment. Whether in moments of avoiding the unbearable emptiness in our lives, experiencing the trauma of losing a loved one or simply having an unquenchable thirst for the ultimate

nature of who we are; we open up beyond the confines of our conditionings. Two sub-themes were identified as representing the major theme of vulnerable beginnings on a journey towards Wholeness. This section begins with some co-researchers reporting a fragmented identity, in which they felt caught between confronting their own emptiness and escaping back into the world of sensation and temporary distraction. Several co-researchers opened up to the journey after encountering the trauma of losing a loved one. I will now turn my attention to these themes as they emerged in the co-researchers' stories.

A Fragmented Identity

Ironically, for some people opening up to the journey towards Wholeness began after a prolonged period of fragmentation rather than with a predictable search for spiritual guarantees of love, happiness and eternal bliss. It is a period of inner fragmentation, confusion and even despair that, if allowed, can be a catalyst for growth. Suffering of any kind, although an uninvited guest, can challenge one to confront daily existence and start to ask fundamental questions about the nature of who they are.

As the existentialists observed, we spend the majority of our time distracting ourselves from our suffering with the allures of life. Rarely do we honestly investigate the underlying conditions of our existence. This condition which we defend against is what May (1953) called a feeling of emptiness while Kierkegaard (1944) described it as an experience of existential dread. Suffering is the result of being in conflict with such a reality. One is so frightened of emptiness that, as Trungpa (2002) noticed "we seek to

prove our own existence by finding a reference point outside ourselves ..." (p. 19), something that will give us identity and meaning. He points out:

> There seem to be so many sidetracks in relating to our life-situations, sidetracks of all kinds by which we are seduced: "Food, gas and lodging, next exit." We are always promised something if we turn right at the next exit as we travel down our highway. There are so many colourful advertisements. We never want to be just where and what we are; we always want to be somewhere else (p. 92).

Although suffering can take on many forms, two of the co-researchers encountered a period of suffering that eventually led into their journey towards Wholeness. This is evident with Naomi who attempted to escape the pervading emptiness felt in her life through relationships with men. She describes it this way:

> I always felt alone and empty. When I was in a relationship ... I always felt alone. There was some aspect of me that felt very sad and alone and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I dated a lot of guys ... I had my choice of men, but it was never enough. It was never satisfying. It just didn't feel right.

Despite such alarming feelings Naomi continued with what initially appeared to be a hopeful solution to her dilemma, only to find herself caught in a cycle of meaningless relationships. She continues:

> So, the lawyers would show up the doctors would show up. I was engaged four times. One was a Ph.D., family doctor, private school, good family. Mom said this is great! Inside ... there's this part of me that shut down. It wasn't right.

Now with an emerging reaction from her family members Naomi was

feeling hopeless and at a loss over what to do. However, while connecting with colleagues at work, "… all of a sudden one day someone gave me the book "I Am That" and I thought this is getting closer. There's something mysterious about emptiness and I felt at home … and so I started to go and see different teachers like, whoever was in town, and who was Advaita Vedanta, and anyone who was talking non-dual …"
What is interesting here is her realization that emptiness did not necessarily have to be feared. It appeared to have a welcoming feel to it. This was a significant moment in her beginning spiritual journey.

In a similar vein, but with an increased intensity in the emptiness in her life Nancy said, "… wanted nothing more than to find out about the hole that was obviously there that was not getting filled." Believing the remedy was outside herself, Nancy engaged in a full out assault on the material world with the desire to experience anything that will provide her with a sense of identity and comfort. She reports her experiences this way:

> I got dragged through a disastrous marriage, uhh, heavy drug addiction, alcoholism, umm, sex addiction, intellectual addiction, prestige, status, money, umm sexual preferences, both sides … travel. Anything that was neon. Anything that looked bigger. Anything that was more sensory input, because I was not understanding on a deeper level what was going on.

A sense of frantic desperateness is evident in her description. However, after exhausting all her efforts in external pleasures, her journey spontaneously emerged. According to her, "The best way I could describe it Brian is it didn't start for me, it found me. I didn't ask for it." From that point on she found herself suddenly immersed in the spiritual community, reading spiritual literature and adopting spiritual practices. Co-

researchers differed in their opinions regarding whether such an experience was necessary before embarking on a spiritual journey. Naomi believed it was important for her, whereas Nancy laughingly commented that she had no choice in the matter. Nevertheless, a sense of inner fragmentation and the feelings of emptiness were an opportunity for both Naomi and Nancy to bring spirituality into their lives.

A Traumatic Opening

For some, the experience of trauma plays an important role in the journey, and although too painful to accept at first, it nevertheless can bring a person's life to a complete halt. The trauma described here is the loss of a loved one. The predictable routines of life are suddenly shattered and questioned. It is here that life's meaning quickly deteriorates. According to Nishatani (1983), the experiences of death and nihilism towards life are but a few of the key experiences necessary for a journey to begin. In the face of death, the meanings and values placed on life lose their functionality and importance. Thoughts, conditionings, and perceptions about personal existence are radically uprooted and laid strewn across the floor. A host of frantic questions are revealed. In this moment one is slammed against inevitability and left staring face-to-face with the raw unknown. Nishatani (1983) describes:

> A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use. In fact, that abyss is always just underfoot (p. 3).

Such an abyss is more like a "gateway" to the unknown, or an invitation to the journey. Similarly, Welwood (1982) combined the insights of existentialism and the wisdom of Buddhism and named a similar process a "moment of world collapse" (p. 125). It is a felt experience vibrating in every moment of life, but easily ignored. Various defensive structures are erected to defend against it. He suggests, conceptually we are aware of our impending death, but to actually embrace it in the moment is another matter.

Four of the nine co-researchers encountered such an event. Alan's trauma was shocking. He shared, "... in 89 my wife had been in a car accident and umm she was in a coma for four years. And that pretty well blasted me open. I was very closed. It opened everything up." It would be in 1993 after the family chose to end her life support that the concept of "... impermanence became really obvious to me ... and within four months, ummm I had already decided I had to change my life." The life Alan once knew quickly fell away. Rather than shutting down his abilities to function, he used this experience as an opportunity and made a drastic change in all areas of his life. Particularly, spiritual seeking with an emphasis on the question "Who am I" became a primary focus.

Both Dan and Jason entertained similar questions when faced with the loss of their loved one. Jason remembered being faced with a huge question mark in all aspects of his life when his wife died twelve years ago. "That was when I was questioning what life was all about. What's this existence? What's its meaning? ... What is this all about? And what am I doing? ... sort of questioning everything. Everything just comes up with a question mark." There was no sense of permanence in his life.

Dan had the opportunity to address such poignant questions with his dying wife during the later stages of cancer. Together they explored alternative healing practices. He

recalled, "At a certain point in her diagnosis, uhh, the medical profession got to the end of what they could do and that started the both of us on a journey of exploring healing, holistic healing, alternative complementary healing, and that was kind of the start ..." Even Ken Wilber (1993b) also experienced a compelling journey with his dying wife, Treya, during a five year battle with cancer. They both explored and challenged both conventional and contemplative treatments for her illness before her death in 1988.

After his wife's death, Dan would begin with what was to be an extensive spiritual journey. Jason also began looking at life through a spiritual lens, turning inwards and observing his behaviours more closely. He shares, "... it was like a wake up call to start looking at things more seriously ... so, when death stares in your face like that ... you start to think about your own mortality." Following his partner's death, Jason embraced a spiritual approach in both his personal and professional life.

Sean's mother passed away when he was young child growing up in England. Instead of having the opportunity to embrace her last days it was determined by the family that he move to Canada and remain under the care of his aunt. This was a very confusing experience for Sean. With emotion he shared his experience:

> ... so there was an aunt who lived in Vancouver at the time, my mother's sister, and umm, she decided quite spontaneously to send for me, which was kind of unusual.... She was 55 years old, single, a little eccentric, not married, had not been married, umm, lived with her aunt, you know. So there was a bunch of skeletons in the closet and who knows what else that was going on that I was just completely unaware of ... I knew mother was sick. She was in the hospital and I

> remember waving goodbye to her at the window, but it wasn't until a year later that I was sort of advised that, informed that my mother was … had passed away.

Even though he was young, Sean remembered it as a "shocking experience" and he was left with several unanswered questions including, "… What is this all about?" followed by a "… numb feeling. As a child I questioned … like somebody's here and they're suddenly gone. What is that all about?" Although he was a young child at the time, he commented that this was a "turning point" in his life.

Trauma allowed for a "falling into oneself." The four co-researchers remarked on how they eased into the process of giving up old habitual patterns of living and turning towards embarking on the spiritual journey. This suggested the need for trauma to take place in some co-researchers lives in order for the spiritual journey to begin.

Whether it was from an encounter with emptiness or through trauma, each co-researcher used their experiences as a stepping stone to becoming "spiritual seekers". I will now turn my attention to the journey itself.

A Journey into the Unknown

> *The spiritual path is not fun---better not begin it. If you must begin, then go all the way, because if you begin and quit, the unfinished business you have left behind begins to haunt you all the time.*
>
> *(Trungpa, 2002, p. 149)*

For some seekers the journey is not something that can be easily turned on and off. It becomes a way of life, a way of being. Once there is a glimpse of the beyond there

is often no turning back. When the familiar patterns of life hold little substance the call to turn inward becomes that much stronger. At times, one cannot help but acknowledge the call of the journey.

The search for Wholeness is not a naturally fluid affair. There are many pitfalls encountered. What is often thought of as a rewarding adventure can turn into a radical, intense confrontation with oneself. Each co-researcher described their journey and experiences with expressions of laughter, love, anger and frustration. Four sub-themes representing the seekers journey emerged in their stories. A few shared feeling a sense of desperateness to the answers to life mixed with feeling overwhelmed when walking through the spiritual market place and encountering an endless stream of spiritual techniques guaranteeing higher levels of consciousness. A few co-researchers reported how psychic phenomena and the practice of self-enquiry catapulted them beyond ordinary ego awareness. Some describe this as a state of witnessing. I will begin with those experiencing a sense of desperateness.

Riding the Wave of Desperation

From a brief experience leading to a full-out investigation a desperate search begins. It is riddled with spiritual questions fuelled with a desire for enlightenment and Wholeness. This journey has been traveled by many for thousands of years. Gautama the Buddha is a classic example. After realizing the inescapable fact of sickness, old age, and death, Siddhartha Gautama renounced his personal life and worldly pleasures and began a journey for Wholeness. Desperate to resolve the personal dilemma Siddhartha vowed he

would not remove himself from under the Boddhi tree until enlightenment was found (Bucke, 1973). More recently, and in his own words, Ouspensky (2001) described a similar state of desperateness before becoming a devoted student of Gurdjieff's. "I felt that my search, and everything connected with it, was more important than anything that was happening or could happen in a world of "obvious absurdities"" (p. 3). The thirst was so intense that he was willing to sacrifice the life he had known for a taste of the beyond.

Desperation was the experience for two of the nine co-researchers. After the death of his mother, Sean was newly armed with fundamental questions about life, and the beyond, and was subsequently drawn to Eastern esoteric traditions where he fervently explored their teachings. He remembers:

> I was in a state of desperation, like what is this all about? I have to find out ... I'm beginning to develop an interest in Eastern mysticism and philosophy and sort of landed in Taoism, and I'm going, OK! If I try this out and really kind of give my all for this I should be able to connect with the Tao ... to me this was the big ticket. This was what life was all about. It was to find this thing, right, and umm, nothing else really mattered ...

Not only did he explore Eastern mysticism but he also turned his attention towards Western psychology in hopes of answering his fundamental question, "What is life all about?" While attending several men's groups and counselling sessions over several years, Sean realized "... psychology, counselling, men's work ... none of those seemed to, you know, bring a completion of that fundamental question." It appeared traditional psychology was rapidly losing its validity.

For Dan, after losing his partner to cancer, he described feeling a frantic desperation for spiritual truths. He remembered entertaining the question, "What is enlightenment?" He began attending *satsangs* where he persisted with his question. He explains:

> Every time I talk to a teacher, I want to know what it is that happens and what it's [enlightenment] like afterwards?.... it even takes me over almost Brian, to want to know what it is. "What is it?" "What you're describing I understand the words, but I don't really understand what you're talking about," you know?

He avoided the trap of theoretical explanations and was determined to have his own experiential understanding. After the death of his wife and explorations of alternative healing strategies, he began to doubt his traditional Irish Catholic upbringing, and shifted his awareness to the core of Christ's teachings and meanings. Dan began challenging and questioning the church by asking:

> What are they saying when they're saying something, you know. It was the start of a whole process there of "What is all this?" "What's this religion they're telling me?" "How much of it do I believe?" "What effect does it have when I say some of the things I say," you know, which are very warm and that kind of mentality you know; to a point where I dismissed a lot of it as being absolute BS you know; to also explore what they really were at. Even though the words were saying one thing maybe there was really a deeper meaning in some of the words. At that point when I really got through some of that and really started to enjoy the mass it was the real essence of Christ that I was connecting with ...

The essence of Christ was felt beyond the walls of traditionalism and it was not

long before Dan found himself attending church less regularly. He began synthesizing aspects of various religions and identifying with their core similarities.

A desperate search appeared to spring forth from the experience of losing a loved one for both co-researchers. Each described the initial thirst and intensity for the search itself followed by the deconstruction of traditional psychology, and turning from the buffer of religious scripture to a desire in having a direct experience for themselves.

Plunging into the Spiritual Market Place

This theme looks at the many different paths encountered along the spiritual journey. It appears that once one acknowledges the call of the journey, there is an immediate plunge, often overwhelming at first, into a variety of spiritual traditions, techniques, and gurus of all kinds. Marked with a sense of earnestness and excitement seekers begin the process of experimenting with the latest approach to attaining Wholeness. Six co-researchers described their experiences.

Nancy, in particular, described "diving into the Market place" by jumping from one non-dual teacher to another for an extended period of time. Not only was she attending *satsang* but she was also personally involved in providing housing for and working with certain spiritual teachers to develop and arrange workshops and community *satsangs*. It was so busy that she stated not being able to remember some of the teachers she had visited. She shares, "I worked with Adyashanti in California, and then Toni Parsons. I met some local *satsang* teachers in the non-dual tradition. I met Nirmala from Arizona. I met Catherine Ingram, and Pamela Wilson, and oh man! It was really fast and

furious there for about 18 months …" Following this Nancy noticed a decrease in the need to see all these teachers and recalled settling into "those teachers that suited me best, that just suit me best ... right now, I need the sort of Kali, no bullshit. It has to be hopeless and helpless. It must be helpless and hopeless now …" It was the "all guns blazing" approach that suited Nancy the best. What is important to note here is her realization that any teacher promoting a self-improvement plan based on the idea of hope was not worth connecting with.

Naomi remembered feeling initially excited when she embraced Buddhist practices but soon encountered feelings of disillusionment when spending time in organized religions. "I went and became engrossed in Buddhism but it felt like there were a lot of politics, sexism, you can't be a monk … and you can't do that. Although there is some foundation of truth I still felt separation." She returned her attention to the work of Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian sage whose teachings had a prior impact on her. Naomi began to re-read a collection of his discourses entitled "I Am That" and found herself drawn towards non-dual teachers.

Several of the co-researchers entered the spiritual arena via India. Randal remembered identifying the limitations of "Western New Age Spirituality" when he noticed how attached he had become to adopting a spiritual identity. He made the decision to visit India and seek guidance from Indian gurus. He shares:

> So what that caused me to do was really look at this issue of attachment, to getting things, to having things the way I wanted them to be. And so I thought, who's good at knowing about this because … I can't do that, and then I realized,

> well, that's the whole trip of the Indian gurus. So, I thought one way was to go to India travel around and find a guru and handle this attachment thing.

For Randal the fountain of spirituality was to be found in India. He ended up living in India for a year practicing various forms of traditional meditations before returning to Canada.

For Dan the spiritual attraction to travel to India happened while attending a workshop on holistic healing in Ireland. He remembers:

> I started to explore healing art called Vortex healing and the teacher of that healing art started to come to Ireland and ran workshops there, but as part of the healing art, he would talk a lot about his own spiritual interests and spiritual search … he started to introduce me to two elements of more Eastern religion, which is the Advaita path, the non-dual and the devotional path as well, actually. He was interested at that time in Avatars, and introduced me to those, and I started to go see them, and people like Papaji. He had this book of Papaji in one hand and this Mother Ammaji in the other hand like a mirror, and I'm going oh! So I went on a whole run going to see Mother Mira, Mother Ammaji …

Together with his new partner, Nancy, whom he met in the spiritual community they moved to India and lived in a spiritual community facilitated by Mother Ammaji before returning to Canada only after several weeks.

While attending university Mark was becoming increasingly impatient with his studies in politics and philosophy until he came across the work of Krishnamurti. He immediately became curious about the spiritual journey and intensified it through extensive travel and reading. Unlike some of the other co-researchers, he had the

opportunity to extend his journey through several other counties including India, where he spent considerable time in various Buddhist monasteries. He describes this beginning spiritual emergence:

> I was at university in the late 70s and I came across Krishnamurti's stuff. Now he's not non-dual but he certainly peaked my interest and so I think I started reading a lot of his books ... I was so moved by Krishnamurti ... But all I have to say is that I traveled through India in the early mid 80s ... went to Africa, came back and made a little money, went back through Europe and went overland to India. From there I started reading much more and started finding out about Advaita Vedanta.

Mark's journey did not end there. He spent considerable time meditating in Buddhist monasteries in different countries including Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and then India. Upon his return to Vancouver he attended *satsangs* held by local and visiting non-dual teachers. Mark continues to integrate the journey into both his personal and professional life.

Following the death of his partner, Alan found comfort moving to Santa Fe and attending Yoga and body work courses before being introduced to *satsang* with Gangaji. He felt a deep connection with Gangaji's teachings and followed her around the world for a year attending her *satsangs* before arriving in India and meeting another non-dual teacher by the name of Papaji. Alan would spend months at a time with Papaji each year before his death in 1997.

Whether it was participating in organized religion, traveling to the East, attending *satsangs* and meditation retreats or engaging in Western forms of new age spirituality,

each co-researcher felt it was essential to explore as many spiritual avenues as possible for the means of deeper psycho-spiritual transformation.

Psychic Entertainment

Along any journey there exists a certain level of attraction to the scenery. This was very much the case with seekers walking the spiritual path. The more one plays with consciousness the more likely it is that he or she will experience states beyond a separate self. According to Eastern and Western wisdom traditions these experiences can include but are not limited to: preliminary meditative states, "peak experiences," arousing of Kundalini energy, episodes of out-of-body experiences, and the awakening of extrasensory perception. According to Wilber (1999a) this activity marks the beginning of contemplative development, which is level seven on the developmental spectrum of consciousness. Essentially, one begins to learn how to investigate, manipulate and move beyond cognitive and perceptual functional abilities to include a more universal perspective.

Two co-researchers provided descriptions of such experiences. Jason recalled feeling extremely fascinated by these experiences. After prolonged periods of meditation he was beginning to experience rushes of energy throughout his body mixed with audible sounds. He said:

> I started more off with Zen and vipashyana and Buddhist kind of stuff, and then after a few years, I discovered Advaita and since then it's been all that kind of focus and interest, but ummm, those times of meditation were quite intense at

times and did lead to psychic phenomenon or visual, auditory things. So, those things have happened for me and I used to, like most people, I put a little more emphasis on them then is really necessary. But I think it is a natural kind of thing … when these things first started happening to me several years ago there was a subtle kind of attachment. Actually, it wasn't subtle at first. It was like, Wow! This is great! I want to experience this again, you know. So, I would try really hard, and when I tried hard it wouldn't happen of course … also, that's not what it's all about anyway. That's just some scenery along the way. And the scenery is ok. It's ok that its there, and its ok that it still happens from time to time, but the importance that we place on that is dramatically lessened. It's just an occurrence. It's just phenomenon. It changes like all other phenomenon. Anyway, the hum, I just call it the hum or the buzz of life … all of a sudden out of nowhere the buzz, sometimes its very intense and it will go on for, it doesn't usually last more than a minute or so, maybe a couple of minutes at the most. But the only way to describe it is it's a buzz, but it's like a whole body-mind thing that happens. It's as if though everything is just vibrating, just buzzing! It's almost like a multi-temblor synthesizer, you know, that's making this interesting sound….When I get involved, when the little me gets involved and wants more of that, wants to cling to that, then it goes away.

Jason's spontaneous experience began with a buzzing sound and it noticeably concluded when he intentionally became involved and attached to the experience. The buzz experienced by Jason is a frequent characteristic of rising Kundalini energy. Gopi Krishna (1972), an authority on Kundalini awakenings, discusses such experiences.

These experiences can be produced, but are often spontaneous in nature. They typically consist of a variety of sounds ranging from humming and buzzing, to drumming and popping.

Unlike Jason's audible experiences, Randal encountered something different. His experience presented itself in a visionary form. He described it this way:

> When I meditate … which was daily and at that time quite a bit … all kinds of cool inner experiences would happen…. If I were to describe how I experience non-physical realms, it really is almost as if there were rivers and oceans and clouds of energy that move and do this, and move and animate us and things beyond our control….

In a similar breath Randal later realized in his practice that he was merely being entertained by these experiences and that they too would come and go. They were no different then his attachment to worldly possessions, and yet, despite this understanding he found himself identified with the experiences. Almost feeling addicted to these experiences, he arrived at the realization that he was not having "… the real depth of stillness, you know. Real stillness … was not usually the foremost experience I was having. It was more like these cool experiences." Randal spent many years captivated by these experiences before moving beyond them. Many spiritual teachers warn of becoming fixated on these capabilities. Wilber (1999a) agrees, pointing out that the psychic level is simply a "gateway" to the transpersonal. Three more levels exist beyond the psychic. Psychic capabilities are available for anyone willing to study and develop them, but they are not to be regarded as the end of the journey. When Dan was asked about whether he had psychic experiences he replied with laughter and said, "Luckily for me, I don't have

much of that. I don't have much, because I can tell this personality would go oh yeah big guy! You're getting there."

Now that I have outlined the beginnings of the journey let us now explore how some co-researchers began practicing self-inquiry.

Practicing Self-Inquiry

Those who embraced the journey often felt the need to adopt a method or technique when "doing" spiritual work. Many methods and techniques are readily available to the earnest seeker, but often such techniques are limiting and only address the act of seeking and its externalized results rather than the seeker herself. Although he supported and even at times encouraged seekers to follow their traditional paths, Ramana Maharshi is known for teaching self-inquiry as a means of realizing our essential nature. In the end all "... methods only lead up to Self-inquiry" (Osborne, 2001, p.27). At any opportunity he challenged seekers to confront themselves through the process of "vichara" (self-inquiry) in asking themselves the question "Who am I?" Self-Inquiry is not a traditional "method" because "... like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will in the end get destroyed" (Maharshi, 1988, p. 5). Ramana (1988) revealed:

> Self-inquiry is certainly not an empty formula; it is more than the repetition of any mantra. If the inquiry "Who am I?" were a mere mental questioning, it would not be of much value. The very purpose of Self-inquiry is to focus the entire mind at its Source. It is not, therefore, a case of one "I" searching for another "I." Much less is Self-inquiry an empty formula, for it involves an intense activity of the

> entire mind to keep it steadily poised in pure Self-awareness. Self-inquiry is the one infallible means, the only direct one, to realize the unconditioned, absolute Being that you really are (p. 76).

Three of the nine co-researchers chose to speak of their experiences with self-inquiry at length. Randal remembers beginning his practice upon arriving in India to search for a guru to help him with the problem of attachment towards manifest existence. Initially, he remembered feeling overwhelmed with the amount of racing thoughts flooding his mind, and not being able to cease the endless barrage. Feelings of frustration and boredom soon followed, and Randal almost gave up his practice and search altogether. However, after several months of intense practice, discipline and guidance Randal felt himself beginning to dis-identify with who he thought he was. He stated it felt as though he was "falling more inward" rather than identifying with each thought as it arose and giving it attention. He shares "… at first there was more of a negation I would say in the first couple of years of … more like, I am not Randal. I am not this item. I am not what I see. I'm not what I hear. I'm not what I feel.… It was strange at first but then I began to feel more free."

This was a similar case with Osborne (2001), a direct disciple of Ramana Maharshi, who described in his own journey "The only way out is through persistence and constant alertness….The mind is like a monkey rushing from tree to tree, ever restless, never content to be still" (p. 96). In asking, to whom do these thoughts come? the mind becomes silent. Randal continues to implement the practice of Self-inquiry in all aspects of his life. He even laughed at how the mind operated, stating that before beginning the practice he believed he had to set time aside each day in order to do it. He

realized this was something that could be done anywhere and at anytime. He laughs, "The mind will find many tricks to avoid being destroyed."

Sean was introduced to the work of Ramana Maharshi through his friends and began reading his books. At first, because of prior conditioning through other spiritual practices, Sean was expecting quick results from the practice. There was the hope of something magical happening, and yet, he noticed there was nothing taking place. The practice appeared difficult to grasp. "The first time I [read] Ramana Maharshi, I didn't get it. It just seemed to me like what is he talking about?.... Self-inquiry, asking, 'Who am I?' I didn't get that either." Despite this Sean persisted and continued with his investigation. Eventually and for brief moments this "nothing" at the end of the question began to expand. Experientially, he was slowly understanding "... the point of asking that question, who am I? is the fact there's nobody there. There is nobody there. I would ask that question and couldn't find anybody there. You can't find this so-called me." Because of its simplicity Sean struggled accepting what he had realized. "It's so obvious and so simple, you kind of go yeah! That can't be it." In accepting this understanding it would mean the absence of an individual me. The act of entertaining thoughts gives the impression of a separate self. In the presence of Ramana, Osborne (2001) found it was "not about thinking, but about suspending thoughts while retaining consciousness" (p. 96), leaving one free from self-identification.

Self-inquiry transcends the boundaries of religious and spiritual traditions and makes itself available to anyone, from all walks of life, who is on the quest for Wholeness. Each co-researcher regarded self-inquiry as the most effective "non-method"

existing in the spiritual community. It appears the practice of self-inquiry will be explored at some level on the journey towards Wholeness.

A Taste of Witnessing

We take ourselves to be strictly individuals preoccupied with endless ego projects used in maintaining some form of independent existence. This becomes interrupted the more one begins to understand and embrace a witnessing orientation. Many paths lead to a witnessing orientation, especially that of self-inquiry. The "Witness" or observing self is not something independent that suddenly emerges, although it may appear that way initially, but rather the Witness is present in all experiences since the beginning of conscious development. It is what we are prior to the mind and all of its identifications. It is a process, often as a result of some form of meditative practice, marked by a beginning dis-identification from the gross level of physical existence. From this view awareness begins to slowly expand beyond the body-mind construct (Wilber, 1996).

Freedom from self-identification can create a boundless state of awareness. While integrating the practice of self-inquiry into his jogging meditations, Mike experienced a state of dis-identification from his body-mind. On one particular day, unexpectedly, he noticed a transformation from an ordinary state of ego awareness to a position of witnessing. He remembered it this way:

> I run for exercise and I run up a hill and walk down, and run up and walk down, and as I was going through this routine one morning umm, sometimes I will just

> take on a little mantra ... I would run up the hill and I would say to myself, "Who am I? I am not my body." And a certain lightness would overcome me and a realization that I am not my body. But this morning as I was running up the hill there was a realization that there was a subtle fracture in myself ... there was this separation ... the self was back just observing ... so there is the body and the self just cracked and separated from within my body. And so I was running up the hill and I was perceiving myself now just from above myself observing myself. I was witnessing myself run up and I made it to the top and I remember this halfway up the hill and there was this realization of what happened and I sustained this position walking back down and running back up the hill again. On the third time I remember smiling because I was witnessing my body but I wasn't experiencing the pain of running up the hill, and I thought wow! This is remarkable! I didn't feel the pain. It was a lot easier.

Just as quickly as it came, the experience faded. Frustrated, Mike attempted to recreate the experience. He stated, "I was just witnessing and then it quickly leaves ... and then I try to reproduce the experience and smiling realized that there is that ego component of the self trying to create the experience. And that happened several times. It's never happened again, but I smile at how the self tries to create it, knowing there is nothing I can do to create it." It appeared to be in the absence of personal involvement that an expanded state of witnessing awareness emerged.

Furthermore, several co-researchers commented on the qualities of "spaciousness" and "acceptance" while witnessing. Naomi said, "I think miraculous things can happen just when holding someone in spaciousness rather than judging." For

Nancy spaciousness was the best way for her to describe the experience of witnessing. This allowed her to observe all of her thoughts and desires from the background of awareness without being identified and carried away by them. In particular her destructive desires, which she called "neon desires," had a significant negative impact on her life in the past. By witnessing these desires she loosened her psychological attachment preventing the likelihood of identifying with them. She shares:

> … when the neon arises something watches it. And the desire for neon will still arise. So for example, I was watching a movie last night. A woman who is using a particular combination of hard drugs, it used to be one of my favourites and I chose to buy them in a bar, which is what I used to do, and I watched all this desire rise in the body and all this desire for that experience and then fall, and then just relax again … there's so much space to live in, so much space for all those other activities to rise and fall.

This practice was not simply limited to her desires but included what appeared to be all aspects of her life. She went on to say:

> There's a lot of space to live in, and there's a lot of space for all my judgments, space for all my reactivity, a lot of space for my cultural conditioning, lots of space to observe that, and a lot of gentleness about just allowing it to live itself. So, there is no more judgment about the judgments. There's no more trying to keep the reactivity up, you know, in line. There's no rationalizing it, justifying it, all those mental overlays that used to cause so much tension and gripping and suffering they just don't happen anymore. It's a blessing, I didn't do a thing. It has a quality the spaciousness for me. It's very gentle, very gentle. That gentle space

> allows that. Nancy can't do that. Nancy is made of judgments and limitations and smallness and pettiness, and self-loathing and the usual. The personality has those frames. That observation [the Witness] cannot be seen by my personality. It can't.

Where there is judgment there is the mark of individuality. The Witness is not an object that can be seen by the individual self. As the process deepens, witnessing transcends the limits of time, space, and individuality.

Similarly, Sean noticed that the more he became identified with his thoughts, rather than with allowing them to run their course, the less open and spacious he felt. He described, "It's a difference between a flood light and laser beam, you know. And it seems that awareness can do this. Awareness can be very, very focused and very, very sharp, and it can also be open and global." The more he adopted a witnessing perspective the more at ease he felt with life and all of its contradictions and sufferings. He shares, "... when I'm connected with that, its just so immensely beautiful. Life is just so immensely beautiful, and the sense from back in that is that really everything is OK."

Thus we can see the beginnings of witnessing awareness through the process of dis-identification from the body-mind, which is often the starting point for self-transcendence. Such qualities as acceptance, non-judgment and spaciousness exist when moving beyond an isolated identity and embracing a witnessing position. The deeper one merges with the Witness the more one is led beyond their self-identity and submerged into deeper depths of consciousness, revealing the reality of impersonal existence.

Journeying Through Relationships

In a society, there is a deep expectation that you will behave exactly like others. The moment you behave a little bit differently you become a stranger, and people are very much afraid of strangers.

(Osho,1999, p.103)

To travel outside of the expectations of others is to become a stranger in the midst of the status quo. Just as firmly held belief structures, personal viewpoints, judgments and positions in society can begin to take on a new meaning or drop off altogether in the face of the journey, so do relationships with friends and family. There comes a time when stepping out of the herd mentality appears to be necessary step. However, there appears to be a price attached to this. Our intimate connections can be challenged when it becomes evident that not everyone is open to and welcoming of such a focus on psycho-spiritual development.

Several co-researchers encountered dramatic changes in their relationships with both family and friends. Most noticeably was the dissolution of social relationships based on social acquaintance, greed, alcohol abuse and personal success. A few co-researchers encountered negative reactions from family members, while on the other hand some shared feeling more connected with them than they ever have before. Also, some co-researchers described the experience of parenthood as being a mere function rather than an essential identity. This section will begin with the death of old relationships encountered by some co-researchers.

From Social Superficiality to Authenticity

The death of social connections based on trivial superficiality and simple ego gratification can offer a chance for dis-identifying from a pattern of fakeness and social conforming, and reconnecting with ourselves in the present in a more authentic way. A time comes when one must step outside of the "social herd" and begin to create one's own stance in existence. The journey towards Wholeness brings about a dramatic change not only in ones personal world view but also within ones social perspective. The more one relaxes into Being the more transparent superficial relationships become and, eventually, the social fabric of one's life begins to collapse under pressure.

This was the case for four out of the nine co-researchers. Three co-researchers noticed a process of restructuring their social relationships. Following the emergence of his spiritual quest Alan was quick to share he found that he did not "... spend a lot of time with [his] old friends, my drinking buddies or anybody like that anymore. Not because I reject them, it's just that I have nothing to say anymore..." A departure from his old drinking friends meant a move towards authentic living.

This was a similar experience with Jason where in the beginning of his journey, "... it [seemed] like once you ... are moved in that direction ... certain friends start to fall away. It's a natural occurrence. It's like you don't call them. You're not moved to call certain people, and they don't call you, and it just kind of happens. You can't sort of look back and pin point it. It's just a natural kind of unfolding." There appeared to be a rapid yet natural dissolution of Jason's his old relationships.

Once he had a taste of meditation it did not matter whether Randal was accepted by his peer group or not. His interests were focused on meditative techniques and again, "… the non-spiritual friends all dropped off, because I was doing all the meditation and stuff. I wasn't hanging around people that do a lot of alcohol and just want shiny new things all the time. So, that dropped away very quickly." Material success lost its appeal and was meaningless.

Nancy's experience was not as smooth and rapid as some of the other co-researchers. Not only were her social relationships challenged but so was her career as a civil litigator through which she maintained a highly successful career and lifestyle. The pursuit of prestige, social acceptance, money and positional power was intoxicating for her. For years nothing appeared to matter but making a name for herself in the firm. She described that period in her life as an "externalized desire for satisfaction." Once she began the journey she noticed deterioration in her social network. The social relationships she had once held in high regard began to dissolve. She explains:

> Nobody has anything to do with me anymore from my law practice. Nobody, not my clients, and not my colleagues, and not my friends from that period, because they are not interested in me unless I'm also interested in status and prestige. They're all gone. There are a few that phone occasionally, but there was a lot of social life there that's gone. I don't have the social interaction on the surface anymore, at all. So, I used to have a very active social life with people that I knew a little, what I would call a social acquaintance, where social interests were simply exchanged. Those are gone completely.

This was not a particularly sad experience for Nancy; rather, she was surprised at how much energy she had invested in maintaining such superficial relationships. The pattern of making "social deals" with others has faded away and given birth to newfound freedom of expression. Now, Nancy describes her relationships as existing in a "fiery intensity." She explains:

> Actually it has the feeling of fire. It has the feeling of flame. Hot flame. Not nice warm and cuddly. I'm not talking about little coals. I'm talking about the propane tank just turned on and blown through the middle.... They get frightened. They get uncomfortable. They don't want to be around, and it if it's social and they don't know you well enough they will just move away, but you can tell they are very uncomfortable.

She equates this with being free from prior social conditionings and expectations. There is a risk in moving away from societal expectations and living "according to your own light;" not everyone is so welcoming. However, despite this, it appears to be a necessary step in the journey for some seekers. It is important to point out that none of the four co-researchers reported suffering any regrets or feelings of guilt and sadness having ended such relationships. The journey asks us to enrich ourselves by removing the "unnecessary baggage" from our lives where we cannot help but give up our superficial social connections.

Stepping out of Family Bureaucracy

Our seemingly normal family relationships are suddenly threatened by the call of the journey, and conventional family roles are questioned. These roles appear to become suspended in the process of self-inquiry. As the call of the journey is sometimes seen as an uninvited guest, family members will naturally have a reaction, whether it is positive or negative. After spending a period of time in Lucknow, India with Papaji, Alan wrote a letter to his father describing both his spiritual experiences and expressing, for the first time, his love for his father. He shares:

> … I was in India and I wrote a letter to Papaji telling him I loved him. So I wrote a letter to my dad saying, "How come I can tell this old Indian man that I loved him and that I never told you that?" Because I was raised British, so I was very reserved. So, I wrote my dad this letter and then I said I just want to tell you that I love you, you know. So, two to three months later I fly into Vancouver and my brother meets me at the airport and says, "Dad thinks you're in a cult." I understand where he was coming from you know, and then in the end … he's just him. He's just, he's this. There was a lot of acceptance of who ever was doing what, you know. I went and talked to him, and he lived in Ottawa and uh, we talked a little bit about it but he was just who he was …

The process of acceptance helped Alan deal with his father's reactions. On one level, he understood how his father could see the journey as being similar to cultic activity, and instead of self-justification we can hear the absence of judgment and reactivity from Alan.

After returning home from a deeply transformative experience in India, Randal's wife observed a noticeable change in him. While shedding tears he remembers:

> … after the "Big Bang," you could call it in Tiru. When I came home, about three weeks later my wife said to me, "You never did come home." Its kind of sad in a way … I had sadness for two to three months not long after and I never really experienced that before. Just sad. It wasn't suffering. There wasn't a suffering but there was sad there. It's difficult to describe. It wasn't like something I wanted to get out of. It went on for several months.

Randal also noticed a shift in their connection upon his return. He described a sense of disconnection from his wife and feelings of deep sadness for several months. The sadness was the recognition that the "old Randal" and his habitual patterns had been left behind in India. During those months he often found himself questioning whether the relationship was going to survive. Today, Randal and his wife continue to celebrate a life together.

Both Nancy and Jason received a different response from their immediate family. They were met with an atmosphere of approval and encouragement. Smiling, Jason shared how his, "… son and daughter were quite accepting of the whole thing. I mean, they saw me going on retreats and going to *satsang*, you know, and reading all these strange books and they're kind of like what's this all about, but they just accepted their dad was a little different…." This led to a deep questioning of the parental relationship itself. He comments:

> So, the whole relationship with the kids and stuff is … my children are a big part of that … there's still that aspect of it; that attachment of being a parent but

> there's also this simultaneous realization that this is not what I am. This role of parent. Just like the role of a business person that I was or the role of therapist that I am, you know, or whatever else … I guess the seeing of that has deepened over the years.

Even his role of parent was put into question. Although frightening at first, but it soon grew into a more comfortable realization that the role of being a parent was a function of who he was. Seeing this allowed for a sense of integration and expansion beyond a functional identity. He recalled how this realization allowed him to be more fully present with his children, which appeared to enrich their relationship.

For Nancy, living up to the expectations of others restricted her from being present and open in the moment. By letting go of adopted social rules and roles to belong, she experienced a deeper, spontaneous and authentic connection with others in the moment, whether they were family or friends. "What happens more is that I have very deep experiences unexpectedly with people I know or don't know and that there doesn't seem to be a difference between these experiences; between someone I'm very close to like my husband or my daughter and someone I just met. It just goes that deep…" The challenge in being authentic is to be open and honest inside and outside of traditional family life.

This is often a very difficult process. As we observed, not all family members are ready to embrace a spiritual life in each co-researcher. This was also true for Ramana Maharshi. Before secretly leaving home for the hills of Arunachala, Ramana Maharshi came upon strong resentments from his family for "behaving like a sadhu [holy man] while enjoying the benefits of family life" (Osborne, 2001, p. 47). The question becomes,

"Am I ready to risk it all despite the outcome?" It would appear three of the four co-researchers were willing to take that risk.

A Turbulent Encounter with Ourselves

All your problems arise because you have defined and therefore limited yourself. When you do not think yourself to be this or that, all conflict ceases.

(Maharaj,1999, p. 204)

A variety of roadblocks exist along the journey. Because of their perceived complexity, many journeys have ended, leaving seekers feeling lost and disillusioned. Although there were numerous descriptions of "barriers" along the journey, there were three central experiences described by several co-researchers that stood out in the interviews. From having a glimpse of the Divine, only to see it fade away some seekers experienced an aspect of the dark night of the soul. A few co-researchers shared struggling with feelings of anger and frustration, and the rot of spirituality, for not having progressed as quickly as they had hoped on their quest. Some even described experiences of self-inflation when buying into their own myth, believing they had achieved a state of enlightenment which was unquestionable answers for others.

Dark Night of the Soul

The dark night of the soul is a common, yet unwanted event experienced by many seekers on the transformational journey. It can take on many forms but one in particular

deals with the loss of contact with the Divine. A once celebrated journey into expanded consciousness filled with the rewards of mystical experiences can suddenly, without any warning, begin to fade away. The dark night of the soul "is really a deeply human process, in which the self which thought itself so spiritual, so firmly established upon the supersensual plane, is forced to turn back, to leave the Light..." (Underhill, 2001, p. 388). It is a deep sense of being abandoned by the Divine, and in some cases, it is a state of fear, confusion, and misery, which overwhelms all aspects of one's life (Underhill, 2001). Many have reported this experience as tremendously visceral in emotion and too overwhelming to share with others.

The Christian mystic St. John of the Cross provides a haunting account. "The shadow of death and the pains and torments of hell are most acutely felt, and this comes from the sense of being abandoned by God.... It sees itself in the midst of the opposite evils, miserable imperfections, dryness and emptiness of the understanding, and abandonment of the spirit in darkness" (cited in Grof & Grof, 1990, p. 46). In such abandonment one is left in profound solitude and depression. Grof & Grof (1990) describes the dark night of the soul as a plunge into darker territories of inner transformation that without proper understanding and guidance can contribute to the beginnings of a spiritual emergency. Further, Wilber (1999a) characterizes the dark night of the soul as a pathology experienced at the psychic level of conscious developmental. He offers hope that no matter how agonizing the dark night may be for seekers, there are no known cases of it leading to suicide. This is due to the experience of having had a temporary taste of higher levels of consciousness which represent a deeper purpose and meaning beyond independent existence, rather than the common ill effects of existential

or borderline depressions. He highly recommends that one read the accounts of how others have passed through this phase of the journey.

Two of the nine co-researchers openly chose to provide details of their experiences. For several years Sean was having numerous unitive and blissful experiences while meditating and practicing Tai Chi. Gradually such pleasurable states of consciousness began slipping away and negative habitual patterns re-emerged. At first, "I just felt very calm and at peace with things," but then suddenly, "I was sort of back to the same old thing again, being pissed off at the world". Having lost the sense of interconnectedness and peace, a desperate host of questions surfaced. Frantically, he asked, "… how the hell do I get back to that? That must be it! That must be the thing. How do I get back to that?"

Similarly, while attending *satsang* with Pamela Wilson Mike recalled observing the absence of ego when resting in present moment awareness. "And so there I was seated downstairs talking [to Pamela] … I would be dialoguing with her and I didn't know from where I was speaking. I couldn't localize a self. I couldn't identify a point of me…," but after several hours the experience suddenly disappeared and in a similar vein as Sean he fervently questioned "… how can I hold this state not knowing where I was speaking from?" With no suitable reply to their questions, both Mike and Sean intensified their meditations hoping to reproduce the same states of consciousness as before, but to no avail. Mike remembers:

> When I sit down and meditate I immediately go into my TM [Transcendental Meditation] mode and the mantra pops up but the mind starts planning the next hour or the next day. Nothing is happening, and I lose interest and feel depressed

> thinking of what just transpired and continuously trying to bring myself back into this state of quiet. So, it's the same old battle on my own. I can't get there anymore or move ahead.

After several failed attempts Sean began sinking into states of depression followed by a lack of interest in and intensity for meditation. He said:

> ... initially after it sort of faded away there was a period of time where it sort of umm, well the intensity that I had with the Taoist Tai Chi thing was kind of dropped off. It wasn't that same intensity and I felt sad, depressed at times. There was no motivation for anything anymore.

Abandoned, it is as if one appears to have given up the journey altogether. However, Underhill (2001) suggests that although the contemplative life appears to have slowed down in intensity and been replaced with a stagnation of will, blankness, and reactive emotions, this is only a temporary transitional period which can last for months or at the most years before "consciousness unifies itself and a new centre is formed" (p.387). One must allow the Dark Night to run its course in order to step out of it, to see it as a natural phenomenon along the journey.

Both co-researchers sought guidance and encouragement from their friends within the spiritual community while at the same time read the related literature and received pointers from teachers at *satsangs*. Each agreed that it was a miserable experience, but with earnestness and conviction they were able to weave their way out of it and re-orientate themselves. Wholeness amounts to the integration of both light and dark qualities. This is not to make the dark night an expectation, but to recognize it as a potential occurrence along the journey.

Believing One's Own Myth

The preoccupation with manifesting and adopting spiritual characteristics can be all-consuming. There is a tendency for some seekers to display a "God-like complex." In his study of the cosmic Christ archetype Mathew Fox (1988) outlined how a turn from "the quest of the historical Jesus to a quest for the Cosmic Christ" (p. 79) is inherent in us all and is readily accessible for the spiritual practitioner. However, there is a danger lurking here. Sometimes this desire can be unconsciously driven leading to fixation, which simply reinforces the ego. Wilber (1999a) characterized this pathology as "psychic inflation" and for the spiritual seeker it too has to be transcended. This tendency displayed itself with two of the co-researchers.

Fascinated with Ramana's technique of Self-inquiry Sean was beginning to enjoy a sense of freedom from the conditionings of the body-mind. He felt rejuvenated and full of energy and wisdom. Essentially, he thought he had stumbled upon something extraordinary and desperately wanted to share it. Celebrating over twenty years of marriage he turned to his partner and shared his experiences. Despite her indifference he continued to feel as though he had the answers to all of their marital problems. This led to many difficulties in their relationship. Unbeknownst to him at the time, "I set myself up as guru in my own relationship, umm believing I could fix all our problems I believed I had the answers for us, and umm, that I could show her Truth, but that all crashed. There were more problems then before." Dumbfounded, he turned back to his readings of Ramana for guidance and slowly realized it was yet another trick of the ego. He was simply looking for external validation. He went on to say:

> If you're feeling complete with yourself there's no need … because the whole thing about bringing somebody else on board is because at some level you doubt [yourself]. You doubt you're not convinced of it, right. So there's no conviction. So, out of your own insecurity you bring somebody else on board and they're going to validate your position. They're going to say, "Oh yeah, right Sean. I get it. I'm with you on that." The "I" gets validated.

It took time but absorbing these insights helped ease his fixations and allowed for a sense of renewal to take place in their relationship. The attachments to these qualities were the problem.

In a similar position, Dan came across the teachings of Mata Amritanandamayi, better known as Ammaji, and that of Mother Mira. He was mesmerized by them and began deconstructing his traditional Irish Catholic upbringing and "spinning" anyone involved in the dualistic pursuit of God. With a smile he remembers these events vividly:

> … when I was following Mother Ammaji, Mother Mira, umm, they were the quintessential … at the top of the pedestal, and I used to go around, I was working in business in Ireland at the time you know, I only realized that when I look back Brian, I thought I was you know the best. I thought that I had the real story. All these guys that still believe in God and Christianity, no! no! There was a living Avatar and I knew both, and I could introduce them to her and all that. I was hot shit.

Underneath Dan's projections of self-aggrandizement there festered a deep sense of despair and misery. "I thought I was hot shit, fired up and spreading the word, and at the same time I was going to her to fix me because I thought that I was a piece of shit…"

His own dualistic pursuit with Mother Ammaji was revealed. He later stated how this was humbling and caused him to relax his judgments of and projections on others.

The tendency to be swept away by the illusions of grandeur and spiritual importance appears to be a common occurrence along the journey. Through identifying how these tendencies manifested in their own development, the co-researchers were able to work through their own patterns of self-aggrandizement. To be able to manage this seems to be an essential aspect of the journey.

Encountering the Rot of Spirituality

In addition to the crisis of feeling abandoned by the Divine in the *dark night of the soul,* followed by believing in one's own "God-like" myth comes the tremendously difficult period of working through the rot of spirituality. Over the course of his own radical transformation, Free John (1978) described this process as paradoxical in nature. It is an experience marked by extreme exhaustion, lack of motivation, and intensity for the journey, yet it is another necessary step and is to be regarded as an important transitional period. Exhausted in having engaged in a myriad of spiritual paths, methods, lifestyles, and spiritual strategies and techniques, the journey collapses accompanied by feelings of depression, fear, and suffering. It is here that the foundation of the journey is called into question. An overwhelming sense of disorder presents itself:

> The crisis begins to come on. You don't really have a path anymore. You may talk a lot about it, feel a lot about it. It remains a part of your mind, but you don't really have a *path* any longer. That is really the most hopeful sign. The guy is

> beginning to rot! ... It is only when the trip begins to kick him in the face that he begins to soften up, bruise a little bit, feel his fear, his suffering, his dilemma, this constant upset of all our mortality (Free John, 1978, p. 17).

The rot of spirituality is an invitation to realize and embrace the paradoxes of life. Even our beloved spiritual path will drop into the abyss of the Absolute. "So all righteousness, all ordinary spirituality or the search for consolation is nonsense" (Free John, 1978, p.17). It is all rendered meaningless.

This was Mike's dilemma. Since his initial meeting with Pamela Wilson he spent considerable time meditating and following the instructions outlined in spiritual literature, only to find himself stagnant and submerged in feelings of anger and depression. He shares:

> I went to *satsang* with another individual about three weeks ago. The last time Pamela was here I did not go because I was just miffed at the whole journey. I was pissed off, you know, and I thought this has been going on and I'm getting nowhere. I am just pissed right off and I don't know what to do. And so, as the date was approaching of when she was arriving I was in this real turmoil. Just anxiety. And I still had to function but I did not know where to turn or what to do and I was pissed off enough that I didn't go to any more *satsangs*. I thought screw it all. I've had enough of that.

The search was beginning to wither away before him and with nowhere to turn he felt increasingly despondent. In a similar deconstructive fashion Nancy reflected upon how her own encounter with spiritual rot almost ended her journey. She states:

> … there's just so much bullshit Brian its unbelievable and its attractive. It's well marketed. It has traditions behind it in its lineages. It has the strength of history, and it's just absolute dribble and now we've added to the Western dribble the Eastern dribble. So now we've Westernized the Eastern dribble and marketed that as well. There have been many times that I thought of giving up, frustrated and angry at myself and this thing called enlightenment,…"

Mike had the fortunate experience of meeting another spiritual teacher who was able to name the problem and provide guidance. "And so when I met this other teacher three weeks ago and I told him about my experiences he said, 'Oh, so you're going through the rot.' As soon as he had said that I knew what he had meant…. There it was. It was the rot. And then he said to me, 'That's good Mike you're making progress.'

Free John (1978) describes how the rot challenges seekers to directly observe the process of mental activity. In the rot of existence "You will observe the whole quality of your mind, your ordinary activity, your game, the drama…." (p. 18), which includes spiritual seeking. The two co-researchers pointed to this event as the first time they seriously considered ending their journey. Their accounts suggest that confronting the rot of spirituality appears to be a transformational opportunity.

The Guru-Disciple Relationship

Look within,

There is no difference

Between yourself, Self, and Guru.

You are always Free.

There is no teacher,

there is no student,

there is no teaching.

(Poonja, 1996, p. vii)

This section will illustrate the experiences some co-researchers had in the presence of a guru and when receiving their teachings. From the perspective of the Absolute there is no fundamental difference between a disciple, a Guru or spiritual teacher, and his or her teaching. In the spiritual community the relationship with a guru is viewed as necessary in the journey towards Wholeness. It is a relationship which is emphasized by a mutual meeting of two minds rather than falling into the predictable roles of master and servant. Several co-researchers found it important to seek out a guru to further their understanding in their journey. A few became more involved than others.

Specifically, when it came to the desire for a direct experience of the Absolute several co-researchers reported that their first experience was in the presence of their spiritual friend. In some descriptions the experience was so profound, it ultimately left them without a point of self-reference for several days. Others shared feeling "blissed out" and immobile for lengthy periods of time. For these co-researchers their spiritual friend acted as a mirror, reflecting back their true nature.

In addition to exploring the mirror-like role of the spiritual friend, the next section will also describe how some co-researchers moved from devotional practices to more of a non-dual orientation. Here, a few co-researchers were faced with the pitfalls of projecting idealized images onto their spiritual friends while others were caught in the cycle of

dependency. As a result, some co-researchers noticed their devotional practices stopping altogether. Although they were necessary in the beginning, they were simply becoming an obstruction to further spiritual growth.

A Mirrored Relationship

Historically, the relationship with a guru was seen as a very important one in which the guru acts like mirror reflecting back our essential identity. Psychological surrender is critical on the part of the seeker for any real benefit to be derived from a guru's teachings. A relentless process of cleansing, and letting go of personal expectations, concepts and preconceptions is a necessary process for a seeker to undertake (Trungpa, 1987).

Four co-researchers shared their experiences with a similar act of self-surrender. While traveling in Germany, Randal was introduced to a man who was often referred to as the "café guru", and it was his presence that appeared to shake Randal's foundation of self-identity. It was not so much in the words he used but his presence that "... something happened while sitting with him. And before everything was as if I was grasping ... but all of a sudden it was, 'Oh my god! It is living me! It is true! Just a split second, just something happened, just 'BOOM!' It went from someone grasping something to no sense of personal me and then for some days no thoughts." Without intention the sense of possessing a personal self dropped and the sense of "being lived" was apparent. What followed next was a deepening in the understanding of the illusionary nature of the

personal self. Thoughts continued to parade through the mind but surprisingly there was no sense of personal doership. He remembers it clearly:

> … the thoughts started to return, but oddly the personal sense didn't. At first I had trouble when a person would speak, understanding why they were speaking or what was making it possible even for thoughts or words to come together, but somehow a person would ask me a question about, "Where's the food?" or whatever. It could be anything, and I'd be able to respond but with no idea with how that could come or where it came from.… The answer was coming out of nowhere … and then I didn't sleep at first. I was sleeping but I was awake all the time … I was awake in my sleep we could say. I knew I was dreaming. I was awake in the night.… One way of knowing was that I could hear it snoring sometimes.

Awareness has moved from a point of self-referencing to an expanded state of consciousness transcending the waking and sleeping states. Randal felt a sense of freedom and ease, yet it was to only last a few days before he returned to an ordinary state of ego identification.

Jason had a more colourful visionary experience when sitting in *satsang* with Adyashanti. When looking directly into his eyes it was as if "… the room burst into golden light, and everything is just soft and all thoughts stop. My mind stops. Everything is just bathed in this golden light and there is just a deep sense of bliss. There's still the witness but it's not the little me." Together with the dissolution of the separate self there is the appearance of brilliant golden light. Such visionary illuminations can be triggered when in the presence of a guru.

Alan remembered having a similar experience while visiting with a guru named Baruji in India. Although Alan was not devotional by nature and was often in disagreement with Baruji's teachings, he found himself kneeling down before Baruji in a state of bliss. He shares:

> ... at about 11 o'clock at night he would come out and he would go up on this roof and we were sitting outside this building and we would all go running up and everybody would stand in line and touch his feet and then we would sit around for ten minutes. Then he would go back to his room. On the third night I was touching his feet; I was kissing his feet. I just, you know it was just love. It was just like there was no foot there was no one there. It was just, I can't describe it.

Either verbally or non-verbally a guru's role is to direct you back to yourself until you recognize who you are. The guru utilizes an arsenal of techniques in the form of spiritual instructions, including looking into the seekers eyes, and whispering in his/her ear when shifting awareness from the personal self to that of resting in pure Awareness itself. The guru is someone who does not entertain the illusion of individuality regardless of appearances, thoughts and feelings. He or she merely reflects this realization moment-to-moment. What often prevents seekers from seeing this illusion is the fear of vulnerability. The fear of dropping one's familiar ways of being in the world, of being completely exposed, creates the division between self and other (Gangaji, 1995).

In his first encounter with Pamela Wilson, Mike remembered initially feeling reluctant to sit with her. His normal way of participating in the journey towards Wholeness was through intellectual dialogue. She met with Mike privately meeting in his store and "...she asked me to have a seat on the couch and she commenced to make

herself comfortable adjacent to me and asked me to close my eyes and see what the Self sees. And I thought this was all relatively peculiar because I thought we were going to talk and dialogue and here she has me seated down here and I thought I would humour her." Naturally when managing a bookstore comprised exclusively of spiritual literature Mike had developed a strong knowledge base in the spiritual community and was skilled at philosophizing with others, but it is important to realize that "Intellectual understanding may be helpful up to a point on one's quest, but it cannot be the quest" (Osborne, 2001, p. 94).

Despite his doubts, Mike followed Pamela's invitation to directly experience Truth rather than simply engage in intellectual theories and stories. He recalls the experience:

> … I closed my eyes and … she would periodically every several minutes she would ask, "What does the Self see?" or "Is there anything the Self can relate to?" … nothing was really happening … two hours had transpired and I was shocked because in my mind it seemed in one sense I had been there maybe a half an hour so, after about fifteen to twenty minutes, I'm guessing, there was a recognition that my mind had come to a standstill. There was no chatter. There was no dialogue. There was no past no future. It was just a very distinct Now sort of sense. Everything was quiet.

Mike compared the similarities of this experience with one he had twenty years ago as a young adult. Mixed with fear and amazement he continues:

> My mind was quiet. There was total calm, serenity, peacefulness, but I kind of recoiled initially when I relaxed into this because I recalled then my moment of

> four seconds twenty years earlier....When this happened I kind of recoiled because I wanted to hold this moment for longer than four seconds. So there was an initial retraction to sort of hold onto this but in spite of that it continued....There was just total quiet, silence and peace ... she said what I was experiencing in Sanskrit was a *Samadhi*. I thought to myself, "This is *Samadhi!* Let's keep it going"

From that moment on Mike shifted his focus from intellectualizing to the pursuit of experiential understanding. Mike identified Pamela as a guru and has since remained connected with her via the occasional visit and more frequently over the phone.

We have only looked at the benefits of the guru-disciple relationship in revealing one's original nature and, therefore, it must be acknowledged that there is a potential risk of naively falling prey to false teachers with hidden agendas bent on serving their own needs. The next section will detail how some co-researchers experienced devotion as an obstruction to Wholeness.

From Devotional to Non-dual

A host of misconceptions exist when it comes to being devoted to a guru. Devotion is viewed by some as an act of blind service. Although this may occur true devotion does not always inflate the teacher and reject the seeker, instead "... it is a way of recognizing and honouring wisdom, awareness, and truth as higher realities than the egoic realm of confusion.... Devotion is a sign of a shift in allegiance---away from the petty tyrant of egocentricity toward the call of our larger being, whose wisdom the guru

embodies in fully developed form" (Welwood, 2002, p .276). With this in mind we hear of the tendency for seekers to shower their gurus with love, appreciation, respect, and devotion.

For a period of time both Nancy and Dan expressed their devotion to Mother Ammaji in India. Together they sang *Bhajans* [devotional songs], participated in meditations and presented gifts and offerings to her. Life in Mother Ammaji's community was in service to her. "To me the devotional path was the way to non-duality," says Nancy. However, although Dan appreciated the benefits of devotion he felt a pull towards a more non-dual orientation. "I was starting to explore non-dual and devotional you know, and the two of them have played the dance for me for years thinking it has to either be this way or that ..." This allowed for a transformational shift in perspective. Nancy realized she was projecting an idealized image of perfection onto Mother Ammaji, keeping her stuck in dualism. She realized:

> I had to see through it. I had to see that it was a duality, that what I was attracted to is the idea of another human being was better than me; that there was another being whose spiritual evolution was greater than mine; that I could worship and that would take care of me; that would guide me and in that I had to find that I was actually denying my own true nature.

True devotion is done through surrender which requires skilful discrimination. It is critical to "distinguish between mindful surrender, which is an opening to a deeper dimension of truth, and mindless submission which is a deadening flight from freedom" (Welwood, 2002, p. 276). The idea that a guru "will act as a father, [mother], as a teacher to instruct us in life" that she "has vast experience and we have but little" is but a

confused mind caught in duality searching for some form of comfort and security (Krishnamurti, 1954, p. 150). In her own experiences holding *satsangs* Gangaji (1995) observed the natural tendency of seekers to project their own images of who she is and how she should act. Nonetheless in response to seekers she states with conviction "Whatever is projected onto me, I know to be just a projection. I am steady at the present knowing that I am your own self" (p. 19).

Nancy and Dan explored this insight further and eventually made the decision to leave Mother Ammaji's community and return to Canada. For Dan the devotional path was losing its significance and place in his journey. He shares, "... after we came back from India the devotional, its like the devotional path ... I was going to say die but that's not true it became a lie if anything.... And my interest now is very much in non-dual in real non-dual teachers." Dan also carried this insight into his business. When organizing *satsangs* and housing visiting non-dual teachers, Dan was cautious with regard to blindly following those who present themselves up as an all-knowing guru, and when remaining passive with those who were simply rude and ignorant. He stated:

> I don't want to have anything to do with someone who sets themselves up as a guru. I want to police myself where I put somebody up on the pedestal of guru. And if I take some of the teachers we had brought, that we had hosted in Vancouver there's two measurements for me now. One is how hot I feel in the *satsang*. How hot the fire burns for me, but the other part is their personality; is how well I like them as people. So, it's not ok for someone to come here and treat us like a doormat ...

Alan also arrived at a similar realization in the company of Papaji and Gangaji. He observed that while in *satsang* "Most people get stuck on Papaji and Gangaji. When I see Gangaji this great love wells up but if I think I have to be around her for that to show itself then I have a problem. It's not there. That particular feeling is not there when I am not around her, usually. The problem is clinging to that feeling." The pursuit of a particular conscious state or feeling becomes the quest rather than with Truth. When this takes place a certain dependency can grow.

This was Mike's experience, who since his first Samadhi-like experience with Pamela Wilson has noticed a growing dependency emerge. He described it:

> … it's been a struggle to say the least, because I cannot achieve that state on my own. I have to sit with her one-to-one either via phone in New Mexico or in person here. If we go to group *satsangs* there is a certain level I can reach. When I would sit with her in *satsang* with a large group of people there would be a strong clarity in what she was saying and I would think in my mind that this aspect she was talking about I knew before.... In my two and a half year journey I realized I cannot achieve that same level without her. With her I shift into this solid state of Samadhi, and it's not a shift because there is no transition. I've never known or seen a transition. I would sort of just sit there and there is a realization … oh! Here I am. That same quiet, peace and unity with everything. A complete relaxation of all fear, doubt; all questions and its still very puzzling, because I just don't know who is talking … just recently I realized that every time she made a request of me I would go and fulfill it. So, when she said let the self go, immediately the self left.

Krishnamurti (1954) points out that seekers who do not fully understand themselves and the way their mind operates fall into a trap of unawareness. Because one does not observe, with full awareness, their actions, personal miseries, and responses to life, they feel the need for a guru who they hope will take care of their problems. This creates a total misunderstanding. One cannot depend on anyone else for their happiness or peace of mind; one has to take the inner journey and have their own experiences. The problem is in relying on others to impart truth when, in essence, there is no fundamental difference between that of the seeker and guru. When asked about this Alan replied with, "How can you leave your Self behind. Where would I go?" The problem that can develop within the guru-disciple of relationship is "You think that your self is contained in the other. You struggle and become addicted to that guru." This creates an idealized transference game in which the seeker projects their hopes, desires and expectations onto the guru.

As a result of moving away from devotional practice, some co-researchers were entertaining the idea that the journey itself may not be more then merely mental activity supporting a separate self-sense. We will explore this further in the next theme.

Exposing the Root of Suffering

Don't Be Identified

With A Corpse,

and Be Happy!

(Maharaj, 2001, p.63)

To question the journey is to suggest a deepening of spiritual understanding. What the journey initially was built on, a foundation of expectations of achievement, is now beginning to lose its lure. For a number of co-researchers the journey has been thrown into question. There came a point when several co-researchers seriously doubted their search. Not that they ended the journey all together, but with witnessing contradictory experiences displayed in spiritual communities coupled with their own intuitive insights caused several co-researchers to step back and question the path they were following.

For a few co-researchers the hope of attaining Wholeness in the East dissolved when they saw patterns of suppression and materialism that exist in the West were also present, if not more so, in the East. The idea that Eastern mysticism paved the way to enlightenment soon crumbled. Others left the East feeling impatient and frustrated for not having progressed as quickly as they would have hoped, while, more importantly, others realized that seeking itself was the root cause of their suffering.

Seeking is Suffering

All the dimensions of one's life are invested in the journey and spiritual seeking becomes a number one priority. Three of the co-researchers who journeyed to India armed with the belief that Eastern Religion and mysticism were more advanced than any Western contemplative schools were surprised at what they saw. While living in Mother Ammaji's spiritual community Nancy and Dan were shocked by the core similarities in both Eastern and Western religious scriptures and disgusted with the behaviours exhibited by other seekers living there. Dan described it as "... a watershed going to her

Ashram. A big watershed," but paradoxically the disappointment helped him burn through the belief that "... the Indian way was better. That this Hindu religion has anything to offer that's supposedly highly superior ..." In studying the scriptures Dan noticed a fundamental similarity:

> I read some of the books on what the Hindu religion was all about. I had very little idea, you know, about all the Gods and Goddesses and all the rest, and I just started to look and say, "Hold on a second. This is the same as Catholicism. This is just another religion. It has more the essence of the belief in Oneness, but if you dig, you know, there's parts of Christianity that do that very well too.

The difference appeared in cultural conditioning but the core teaching was universally the same. Convincingly, Dan stated, "I don't believe all this bullshit anymore. Suddenly India is more spiritual then all the rest? It's no more spiritual than anywhere else in the world." With feelings of frustration he turned to Nancy for support only to find she was having a similar experience. Her initial attraction to Mother Ammaji and her teachings was due to the extravagant style of presentation filled with lights and music. It was later in her stay that she discovered "This spiritual community is the same as any other community. Exactly the same human desires are going on. There is a great deal of suppression and that it actually ends up looking like religious communities where people are not who they actually are. They are just making a presentation image. I was quite shocked, umm depressed even ..." They could not have imagined their journey was going to turn into a miserable experience. After only five weeks they both left the community and India feeling disillusioned.

While living under the guidance of a spiritual teacher in India Randal experienced a similar period of suffering when feeling as though his expectations of spiritual fulfillment were not being met. He goes on to explain:

> The guru was incredible, there was no doubt, but I felt we were all supposed to reach the highest planes in very short time if we were sincere and all of that. It wasn't going as quickly as I had thought, even though it was going much better than people on some paths would hope for in a lifetime. It still wasn't satisfying … some years later we ended up leaving India in poor health. Very disappointing.

With the signs of fatigue settling in, the belief of Wholeness being found only in the East was met with doubt. The question became whether or not the search would reveal the goal each co-researcher was looking for. Krishnamurti (1954) asked, "Does self-knowledge come through search, through following someone else, through belonging to any particular organization, through reading books …" (p. 30) or does it come when we fully investigate and know ourselves in our present situation? No matter where our journey takes us we are always left with our own psychology and it becomes clear that for some this is the last thing they wish for.

Alan found seeking of any kind was only another form of suffering. In discussions with other seekers "… people would tell me they are on a journey and I often ask them where the suffering is because why would you want to go anywhere unless you are not happy where you are." He explains this further, "To me its like … where is the suffering? What is the suffering? If you can go to the suffering you can see what it is you think you're missing. To me, that's the most direct root, which is to see where the suffering is." To observe the core of suffering is to temporarily cease the pattern of outwardly seeking

and turn awareness inward. Suffering is a result of the search itself. Met with unfulfilled spiritual expectations in the East, the very experiences of disappointment and frustration force one to stop, to question, and to investigate their motives and actions. When seeking stops, even for a moment, insights are revealed (Almaas, 1997). In his clinical work with students Almaas (1997) observed:

> It takes a [seeker] a very long time, a tremendous amount of work, and recurrent, ever-increasing disappointments before he or she begins to consider, "Maybe I'm wrong, maybe there isn't anything in this world that will do it for me." You have to hit your head against the wall so many times. You have to suffer a great deal before you question your fundamental beliefs about reality (p. 22).

When beliefs about spirituality and attaining Wholeness become transparent and hold little validity one begins to play with the notion that maybe what is being sought is the seeker herself. Each of the three co-researchers returned home from India filled with questions and doubts about the spiritual journey. The next theme will explore the end of seeking for some of the co-researchers.

The End of Seeking

> *Is the seeker different from the thing he seeks? ... Is the thinker different from the thought? Are they not a joint phenomenon, rather than separate processes? Therefore it is essential, is it not? to understand the seeker, before you try to find out what it is he is seeking.*
>
> *(Krishnamurti, 1954, p. 30)*

The courage to end the journey of seeking Wholeness led several co-researchers to ever-deepening dimensions of Being. Whether in the form of contemplation or attending *satsangs* with non-dual teachers, the energy once devoted to the act of seeking was suddenly redirected to the seeker himself. The dualistic nature of the seeker and that which is being sought was exposed. As a result, a variety of transformational experiences occurred and insights were revealed. The need to continue attending spiritual retreats, and *satsangs*, and engaged in spiritual practice lessened or ended altogether. Others reported continuing their spiritual practice in some form but not with the goal of "attainment" but rather from the position of having "nowhere to go." Some felt the very act of seeking created a sense of separateness resulting in continued suffering. The familiar sense of identity as a spiritual seeker became transparent and was subsequently entertained as yet another barrier to Wholeness.

This section will begin with the revealing accounts of how a few co-researchers felt there was, in actuality, nowhere to go spiritually followed by the illusionary nature of the individual seeker.

Nowhere to go

The call to question the entire journey towards Wholeness appears to be necessary. In the beginning, the journey held feelings of excitement and anticipation for the adventure ahead, mixed with the desire to attain Wholeness. Yet after a period of seeking the search is unexpectedly "called off." Trungpa (1987) acknowledged the

genuine quality of spiritual seeking but for maturity to develop he invited seekers to question the nature of seeking. He encouraged seekers to go to the very root of their search and "step out of the bureaucracy of ego" (p. 15); to see that the very act of seeking to achieve a higher state of consciousness is what he called "spiritual materialism." It is another way of reassuring oneself that they "... exist, safe and secure, as 'spiritual people'" (p. 15). He continues, "If we do not step out of spiritual materialism, if we in fact practice it, then we may eventually find ourselves possessed of a huge collection of spiritual paths." (p.15), which is really no different than the hordes of material things collected in conventional living.

This understanding appeared suddenly for a few co-researchers. In between his trips to India, Alan spent several years in America in the midst of filing for bankruptcy. On the verge of a meltdown he purchased a ticket to India and planned to stay at the holy mountain of Arunachala in Tiruvanamalai, India with the desire to find peace and solitude. Several weeks before boarding his flight he had a profound insight. He remembered:

> I was thinking about Ramanasramam and the holy mountain and how quiet I would be there and of course I just went click, I thought, "Where do I, you know, what do I think I am missing here?" Because I know when I am there it is just life again. There is a huge energy and there is a lot of beautiful things, but there is still me there. There is still the ego there. So, here is the ego thinking it is going to be better somewhere else.

Alan used this experience as an opportunity for growth. He digested this insight Further, stating:

> It's that opportunity to look and say, "What do I think I am missing here? What does the ego think its missing?" Because that is all it is. With the ego there is a sense of loss. That's all it is. When there is no sense of loss of something that you can suffer around there is no ego.

It seems the desire to be anywhere else physically and/or mentally than where he already was, is another way of rejecting the moment.

Over time Jason noticed, as a result of his seeking, that he was adopting what he called a "spiritual identity." The act of seeking gave the impression of transcending the limited ego but in fact seeking appeared to only strengthen the ego. Because of the amount of time and energy invested in the quest this was understandably a difficult understanding for Jason to accept. He explains why:

> I had trouble with that at first ... several years ago, I would hear *satsang* teachers talk about seeking is actually the problem, and I'm like what? What are you talking about? I got to do this. I need to find out. I want to find out what my true nature is. I want to get enlightened. So, that whole thing was quite a shock for me at first, actually. It took a while for this Source to soften this body-mind in a sense to see that; to see that at a deeper level, and to realize that the seeking actually takes one away, moves one away from your true nature. From what is. The moment I seek I'm moving away from home as opposed to coming home ... thinking that it's somewhere in the future. Its time and space. It's somewhere else and at another time. Some other time and place this is going to happen to me.

The concept of Wholeness being found in another time or place was another form of dualism. The paths of seeking were beginning to give way to resting in present

moment awareness. This was the case for several co-researchers. After numerous failed attempts at "getting enlightened" Sean recognized that "... it's actually futile to search. You're not going to get anywhere. There's nowhere to go. It's pointless ... [and] I'm almost at a point where I don't, I don't feel a need to attend *satsang*. I don't feel a need to go to a retreat ... a lot of that neediness is kind of gone. The game is falling apart."

As a result of their unsettling experiences in India, Nancy and Dan were losing interest in various kinds of spiritual pursuits. Nancy commented, "I'm less interested in going anywhere, cause Dan and I went all over the world you know, searching this teacher and that teacher and going to India and all the rest ... very little interest. Very naturally." Even their involvement in maintaining a local website devoted to non-dual teachers and in housing various visiting teachers was coming to an end. She outlined how the disillusionment felt in India helped her crystallize this understanding at a very deep level. She explains:

> I am no longer interested even a little in enlightenment, but I am deeply drawn very naturally to the Truth. So, it just happens. I've lost control entirely, but I've also lost interest. I am no longer interested in the whole intellectual game ... there is just a plethora of intellectual stuff coming out of the New Age community and all of the Western world about enlightenment, and I have no interest. Now that doesn't happen as a result of either resistance or indulgence if you know what I mean. I like reading but I am about as interested in those books as I am about reading Cosmopolitan. I don't care. It doesn't matter. It's all fine.

Arriving at the point where there is fundamentally nowhere to go and no experience to have is in stark contrast to linear spiritual seeking. We can see this

somewhat with each of the co-researcher's experiences. What follows next is a departure from the external forms of seeking to a radical confrontation with the individual seeker.

The Illusionary Seeker

In exhausting all the avenues of seeking some co-researchers were left with the question, "Who is it that's seeking?" But because of the preoccupation with seeking, inquiry into the nature of the seeker was often overlooked or only temporarily explored. This oversight appears to be motivated by self-preservation because to question the seeker is to begin piercing through the belief of possessing any independent existence.

In his own investigation of the origin of the individual self-sense, Adi Da (1995) found that turning awareness inward toward the one who was seeking revealed not a fixed "me" but a series of conditioned layers of intentions, motivations and desires which constructed the sense of an independent existence. The very structure of the seeker is built through the object of its search. For example, if seeking the image of Christ or Buddha, the seeker will project this image both outwardly and inwardly and continue the journey until he feels satisfied in obtaining it. In his experiences as a seeker "I was always involved in one or another form of the "problem" of conditional existence. I was always in search and research ... [where] everything was communicated to me as a particular objective form, and I (seeming to be an entirely separate, subjective identity) was forced to experience it over against myself..." (pp. 367-368). This only served to further strengthen the individual ego. He goes on to say that observing this process in its entirety dissolved the habitual patterns of seeking as an independent seeker. There was no

individual "me" and yet, "[I] continued to act on a physical level just as before ... but everything was new. Everything was utterly free of any kind of dilemma, separation, unconsciousness, and primary fear" (p. 370). There was freedom from self-identification, and yet at the same time, there was the sense of separateness. It appeared to be a process of paradoxical living.

Two co-researchers discussed how this paradoxical theme emerged at various points along their journey. Intrigued with hearing how other seekers were receiving spiritual names from Papaji, Alan communicated a similar wish to Papaji through a written letter but sadly he received no reply. "When I was with Gangaji in Lucknow a lot of people had spiritual names from Papaji ... I wrote him a letter saying that I wanted a name and he didn't read the letter. So, I went to his house and I wrote him another letter and he read the letter but he didn't do anything right away ... I wanted a name as fresh as the dawn..." Following his second letter a few months later Alan received his spiritual name. "... I wrote him a letter just saying, "Hi, it's me I'm down ..." and he says, "Oh this is beautiful! So lovely to have my son back! I'll give you a new name ... and he gave me the name 'Pabekar,' which means ... God of the morning son..." Unfortunately, the name was difficult for Alan's Western friends to pronounce. It was disappointing. "... I had to repeat it like ten times to everybody before they were able to repeat it back. It was a hard name for Westerners so I used to say its like 'probably a car.' It was the only way I could get people to remember it ..." Frustrated, Alan sent another letter outlining his complaints. At the same time he suspected his spiritual name was another of Papaji's playful interventions aimed at relinquishing his sense of self identification. His

suspicions were proven correct. One evening while attending *satsang* the illusionary spiritual seeker was revealed. Filled with laughter and tears he shares the event:

> … so, I was sitting at his feet and he was calling other people up and I was just gone. I was just about drooling and my eyes were like this, just like a big huge empty space. So, at the end of the *satsang* he gets up and they take off his microphone. He gets up and, he has got two guys helping him out, and he sort of comes over to me and looks at me and stares in my eyes and says, "I forget who you are Mr. No-name." And then it was like, it just doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's all a joke. Who is there to want anything? Even you can't name you. There's no one there to name. Did we ever leave? At some point it [the seeker] just falls away. Until then, sure try and describe it. At some point it just stops. Can't make that happen. Who will?

The desire for any form of self-referencing dissolved. What was once a spiritual identity bent on achieving a particular experience shifted to embrace the awareness of the present moment. A sense of expansion was felt. Adyashanti states, "… as the seeker dissolves, then right here is where every instant is the centre. It's motionless right here" (Adyashanti, 2004, p. 130). For Dan the need to "fix myself" appeared trivial. He explains further that "… seeking enlightenment is not the same, its not … you don't have to do anything. You don't have to go anywhere. It already is. And if anything, the remembering that what's being sought here right now is that remembering … that Dan will never get fixed. Dan will never get fixed, because there is no Dan to be fixed." As Alan expressed "… when I get lost, I go 'Yeah, this moment! Right here! Awareness."

This is a process of becoming acutely aware of all subtle processes of self-identification. Once the seeker is dismantled the drama and structure of the seeker appear to lose their definition. The understanding becomes "When there is a very deep knowing that everything is One, then the movement of the me trying to find [an] experience ceases. Movement is cut off. Seeking is cut off. The seeker is cut off" (Adyashanti, 2004, p. 126).

Both co-researchers acknowledged this process as being a moment-to-moment phenomenon. They described this experience as being fundamental in their journey with the emphasis on "seeing through the seeker." This marks the beginning of radical insights and understandings which will be looked at more fully in the next theme.

Radical Understanding

> *And when this radical understanding comes, it is not a mere idea or belief, or feeling that depends on any circumstances. It is (and more and more becomes) a function of Real Consciousness, of unqualified Being. And, once this Realization (of radical understanding) is Awakened and Established, It (Itself) develops, over time, into the most perfect Realization of radical Knowledge and Free Existence.*
>
> *(Adi Da, 1995, p. 268)*

Radical understanding transcends the limits of linear conventional paths of conceptualization. It is a penetrating insight into the nature of the conditioned self which is observed as the fundamental cause of all suffering. It is a deep realization that all of one's personal motivations obscure and limit the realization of the Absolute existing in

every moment (Adi Da, 1995). Several co-researchers experienced this insight in unpredictable and spontaneous moments along their journey. For some the conventional notions of time collapsed and were replaced by a sense of timelessness. Others confronted the concept of individual death and realized upon investigation that death too was an illusion supported by the individual ego. A few concluded that Truth could not be known through intellectualization; it was beyond knowledge. This seemed to share the same purpose of attempting to uproot the individual ego.

The Collapse of Time

A sense of timelessness was experienced when going beyond the separate self which meant, for a few co-researchers, questioning the existence of time altogether. The individual identity is a result of time. Our behaviours, responses and actions, our particular attitudes and views about the world and ourselves, are an accumulation of the past. The identification with the flow of thought gives rise to the sense of an individual "me" living in time (Krishnamurti, 1975) or as Mark experienced, "Time is thought. Thought creates the notion of time, because who I am is a deep sense of timelessness. It's effortless." Wilber (1996b) points out that conventional notions of time are transcended in the later adult stages of consciousness development. He does not suggest that time disappears altogether but that in the subtle and causal levels of consciousness "… time both collapses into the eternal Now and continues to flow through it and from it. Just as your eye can take in or see all four corners of this page in a single glance, so the eye of Eternity sees all time in one Moment" (p. 88).

This is often difficult to appreciate. Alan through concerted effort, tried to comprehend the idea of timelessness using the mind. He shares, "... I used to try and grasp that. I became really frustrated for years trying to grasp that because obviously there was no way." The limited finite mind cannot possibly comprehend the infinite, eternal present moment. It can only "be" it, which requires no effort at all. In response to seeker's concerns that effort is surely needed when moving beyond the mind and experiencing the timeless "I am" or pure Being, Maharaj (2001) would bring them out of their questioning mind and provide an opportunity for a direct experience of timelessness by asking "The knowledge that you are alive, that you exist, do you understand it through any effort?" (p. 10).

Alan described the timeless moment as an "interphase" between the past and future where "... there is nothing there." Whenever he is invited to share his past he states, "It's a lot easier being me, Now. When I see that there is nothing happening, that there is no time, I can hardly be concerned about what is happening in some previous time. There is just acceptance with the moment." In this place there is no sense of duration and for Alan. He shares, "No duration is big for me. I have to have duration to have time." Duration is another way of saying "becoming" and to become is to be identified with thoughts of self-improvement and attainment, giving the impression of the passing of time. To embrace timelessness demands the rejection of our conventional notion of time as we know it, which means the past and future exist as only a fleeting thought and hold no substantiality (Adyashanti, 2000).

This brought Dan to question whether "finding enlightenment" in the future was possible. The habitual tendency to project the idea of enlightenment into the future was

becoming transparent to him. One night just before falling asleep the dimension of time collapsed before him when he pondered the question "Where is this enlightenment?" He shares it this way:

> And I went, "Hold on a second. It can't be in the future because that's where I always held it, that's where we all hold enlightenment in the future." Any of us who are seeking enlightenment it has to be in the future, because if it was here, it would have already happened, and I went, "Hold on! There's no future." So, the only place I could look for enlightenment was right here and now. And if I don't find it, whatever I conceive it be, end of story ... and what it seems to do to me Brian, and this is what's happening now up to date; "What's happening here Dan? What's happening here?" That's all.

We can see the shift from the fixation on the future to an embracement of the present moment. On another occasion following an evening *satsang* with Toni Parsons Dan reported having a physical reaction in response to the insight on timelessness. He states:

> Tony was talking about timelessness and that there is no time, and for a second it appeared like the mind went there. That's the best way I can describe it. I don't know what happened ... I realized after that something had happened in that second where ... and I can't describe it ... and when I came out I was actually shaking.... My body was actually vibrating.

It appears the concept of time is transcended when expanding beyond the limits of a personal identity and moving towards Wholeness. Co-researchers once caught in the

narrow confines of conventional time now felt, although temporary at times, a sense of freedom and boundlessness.

Beyond Knowledge

Another common experience along the journey is the difficulty in using language or knowledge to describe and understand higher states of consciousness. A mind striving to collect spiritual knowledge is rather limiting. It is not open and receptive to the unknown, which is eternal and Absolute. Essentially, concepts are only used as indicators pointing to "That", which cannot be experienced, named or described. Conceptualization is a means of dialoguing until the understanding emerges that concepts are of little value and meaning and have to be replaced with experiential understanding (Balsekar, 1992). Another exploration of the limited value of conceptualization was given by Ramana Maharshi when he stated that "A concept is useful only so long as you use it as you would a thorn to dig out another thorn which is embedded in your foot. Then, when the embedded thorn is removed, you throw both thorns away" (Balsekar, 1992, p. 133). To appreciate this is to understand that transcending knowledge allows for the possibility of merging with silence. Silence is not to be confused with a state of unconsciousness, rather it is spacious and infinite. The mind becomes still, and consciousness suddenly becomes conscious of itself. It is in silence where one finds the fountain of original wisdom (Rajneesh, 1977).

Co-researchers experienced the limits and difficulties of using concepts to articulate their experiences. The best Sean could do in describing states beyond a separate

self was, "Just this ... you know. I can't, it's difficult to explain. It just is." For Sean there was no description that could ultimately capture and contain the depths of non-duality. The sense of timelessness was ineffable.

In a similar vein when asked to provide a description of the Absolute Dan paused and replied, "I don't know how to talk about this. I don't know how to talk about it ... I mean how can you talk about it? Everything I say will simply be a concept." After a long period of silence Dan laughed and pointed "There's Buddha. It just appeared." He went on to share how knowledge led to self-contraction while laughter was the best evidence of being closer to Truth. In laughter, our built up ego defences have dropped and we are free and open to the unknown.

For Alan, intuition appeared to be a more accurate pointer to the unnameable than reading religious and spiritual literature. It was paramount that Alan have an experiential experience rather than simply parrot what others have heard or experienced over time. He explains:

> [It's] Beyond, beyond anything you could name. Everything, everything is just a pointer to That. I wrote a letter to Papaji about it's really love calling love to itself. But you didn't know. It's like you're feeling this absence that you can't truly ask for because you don't know what it is. In the end you know what it is that you're seeking you just can't describe it. It's something you can't describe, but you know its there. It's a feeling. A feeling and you know, otherwise you couldn't seek it. You can't miss it. That's the joke. In the seed of that longing is the evidence that it is there.

In desiring to "know it" the ego tirelessly attaches labels and theories as a means of making the unknown known. The desire to know and understand Wholeness with the mind may give the impression of progress and spiritual maturity, but in essence this only provides support and security for the individual ego based on a collection of useless facts. A point is reached along the journey when one is invited to go beyond knowledge and embrace a not-knowing position.

Luminous Impersonal Existence

Nothing ever existed;

Not even the creators who created creations.

Much beyond that. There nobody exists.

There the sun doesn't shine,

There the moon doesn't reflect,

There the stars don't appear.

That is the place for you to stay.

Where nobody else is.

(Papaji,1995, p. 541)

Movement towards non-dual living often begins as a personal affair but fundamentally it is revealed as an impersonal process. There appears to be an "alive nothingness" available in the moment. As we have explored in earlier themes the "further" one travels the terrain of Consciousness the more one realizes the impersonal background process involved in moment-to-moment living. For several co-researchers

the illusion of individual existence became clear. Although it was temporary, some co-researchers would direct attention to this impersonal background as often as they could as if "training" themselves to see through the veil of possessing a separate existence. Also, the theme of "having already arrived" was experienced by several co-researchers. The impact of this appeared to be a very emotional process with some individuals reporting feeling initially traumatized, experiencing moments of uncontrollable laughter and tears, and feeling at peace.

Always Already Here

Wholeness is always already here, available in the timeless eternal moment. It is not a separate state of consciousness but rather, a culmination of all states of consciousness, stretching from the mundane to the numinous. This is not a rare and isolated experience, but has happened many times, when, without any effort or cause at all, the illusion is revealed:

> He awakens, as if from a long and foggy dream, to find what he knew all along: he, as a separate self, does not exist. His real self, the All, was never born, will never die. There is only Consciousness as Such in all directions, absolute and all-pervading, radiant through and as all conditions, the source and suchness of everything that arises moment to moment, utterly prior to this world but not other than this world. All things are just a ripple in this pond; all arising is a gesture of this one (Wilber, 1985, p. 157).

This points to the non-dual nature of existence. Wholeness is the fundamental and absolute condition in every moment. The journey towards Wholeness need never have begun, and yet, it could not have been otherwise. For all of manifestation is but a play of the Absolute, and there is no need to arrive at this for it is happening right now, in this moment. Everything is whole and complete, as it is, whether one is aware of it or not. Wholeness is always already the case. It could not be anywhere else but in the availability of the present moment. For anything to be located outside of the Absolute reinforces the dualistic nature of subject and object, and thus, takes "one away" from this primordial understanding (Wilber, 2001). Fundamentally, there is no difference; differences are judgments entertained by the mind to create the sense of independent existence.

Unexpectedly just before leaving India, Nancy had such a taste when attending one of her last *satsangs* with Mother Ammaji where the knot of individuality came undone. She remembers this transformational experience vividly:

> And it broke, it just broke. I heard her, I got it. One day I realized Ammaji is telling me she's the same as me. She means she's the same. It's simple. It's a flat playing field. Everything is God! If everything is God, everything is God! And that includes the table. It includes the cement. It includes the garbage dump. It includes Hitler. It includes, you know, Bin Laden. It includes horror. It includes all the people I see in palliative care dying of horrible diseases for no reason that the mind will ever understand. Everything is God. Man, Brian, I'm telling you, it just blew the socks off me! It blew everything to smithereens! Just everything to smithereens!

In that moment the drama of individuality appeared to shatter. For several weeks,

she reported feeling physically traumatized, almost losing her abilities to function. She describes what took place:

> I was speechless. I was breathless. I was actually physically affected. I felt trauma. I felt traumatized that day. I understood. I was very good to myself. I kept my body warm. I fed myself. I didn't get into any confrontations. I didn't try to do any work. I didn't try to talk to anybody on the phone. I think I got dinner made, which was actually quite sweet because it was familiar, you know. Physically familiar tasks can be very soothing. Yeah, and it just took time, and then everything was God and it kept going deeper …

After several weeks the physical effects subsided. Nancy and Dan made the decision to leave India and return home to Canada. Upon her return she continued to feel the residual effects of her experience, describing it as having the qualities of "depth" and "energy" throughout her day-to-day experiences. She described having an increasing number of "deeper openings" and found writing to be an avenue of expression. Tearfully, she shared a recent piece, summarizing her insights to this point:

> "I'm nothing that anybody ever believed has ever made any difference at all and no action taken or not believed ever happened. Action simply arises. Life is really, really, really meaningless. Everything sees this at once and it woke up everywhere in that moment." So, after that came this next movement, "My intention is a thought. It does not have the power to make anything happen. Intention just happens." Now, when I actually experienced that is when I stopped being interested in enlightenment, because everything sees anyway. So, it was seen that all of that was a thought. It's still a thought and its fine. But it's seen as a thought

> and it's not followed anymore, and its losing, it's losing its strength everyday, because it is simply seeing its own thought. I am here.

Thought appeared to slowly lose its power of influence over her and although the mind attempts to doubt and question her insights it was subsequently seen through because as Nancy stated, "... it's just nothing ever happens, other than just what's arising .... It's just simply, its not believable. It's been seen. It's like it is trying to tell me that the rope is a snake when I've seen that it is a rope." It is not that her thoughts suddenly vanished but instead they lost their significance and were not seen as absolute truths.

A few other co-researchers reported similar unexpected experiences. For years Mark remembered being instructed to change, stop and even improve his thoughts while meditating. One winter day, while meditating in a foreign Monastery, a realization struck him that went beyond his ordinary ego awareness:

> I can remember running outside being naked and doing snow angels in the snow and not being cold or whatever. It was just this inner fire. Something fell away, that's for sure. Something fell away; yet, I had already spent many years in monasteries intensively meditating so in a certain sense ... in a way I knew it, but in a certain sense this was a deeper knowing. Somehow that knowing keeps getting deeper.

For Sean the taste of non-duality opened up before him after spending a relaxing evening with his partner and prior to falling asleep. He remembers it this way:

> ... my head was just about to hit the pillow and everything completely disappeared. Any sense of body or thoughts, umm, no spatial or temporal reference whatsoever. Just absolute nothing, you know, and it was just umm, it

didn't last very long, but it like wiped the slate clean. There was nothing there. There's no self-reflecting consciousness. There was just absolutely nothing. It was a non-experience because there was absolutely no reference whatsoever. Sean was not there..... I came out of it, and I just started crying. I just, you know, this! Then I started laughing and I started crying again and Kim said, you know, what's wrong? What's going on? What's wrong? I said nothings wrong, everything is perfect. This sense of just absolute perfection.

In the absence of everything is the radiating perfection of the Absolute, the nothingness that is prior to all manifestation, the source from which the world as we know it emerges, and the mystery to which it returns. Bathed in vastness and simplicity it is welcomed with roars of laughter and tears of joyful recognition of the selfless nature of everything. It would be incorrect to state that we have come to an end in this journey, because that would imply having reached a goal or achieved something attainable, which, from a non-dual perspective would be dualistic. It would be wise to approach the journey as an ever-unfolding mystery into deeper dimensions of consciousness.

Summary

In looking back at the co-researchers' themes I noticed that vulnerability in the experiences of self-fragmentation, thirst for the infinite and trauma set the foundation for the beginnings of a journey towards Wholeness to emerge. We looked at how co-researchers started on a journey into the unknown in which they experienced an increasing desperation for answers to fundamental questions, and a plunge into the

spiritual market place in which co-researchers explored a plethora of spiritual techniques and traveled to exotic spiritual destinations in search of truth. A few entertained the allures of psychic capabilities while others took up the practice of self-inquiry. Some co-researchers began to embrace a witnessing position beyond the separate self. These experiences led several co-researchers to challenge their existing social and family relationships, moving away from social superficiality to an embracement of authenticity. For others, there was a need to step outside of the rules and roles of family membership and expectation. In working through the perils and struggles faced along the journey we observed how several co-researchers experienced the debilitating descent into the dark night of the soul, uprooted the narcissistic quality of believing in one's own myth, and weeded through the emotional rot of spirituality.

We also witnessed the dynamics of the guru-disciple relationship and the maturity of moving from an apparent dependency often created in devotional service to that of a non-dual orientation. From this point a number of co-researchers realized that the core of their suffering was inherent in the act of seeking itself. This was followed by the understanding that the end of seeking is the result of realizing there is essentially nowhere to go, and no experience to have, and that the seeker herself is nothing but an illusion. In addition to this, a number of radical insights presented themselves including the experience of the collapse of conventional time, and the need to go beyond knowledge in understanding the Absolute. Since a majority of the journey is spent in overcoming the illusion of independent existence, what is paramount, is our last theme of impersonal existence. This points out that the availability of Wholeness is always already here, as both manifest and unmanifest forms of consciousness.

The next chapter will address each of the themes along the journey towards Wholeness and their implications.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study explored the experiences of those along a journey towards Wholeness. It focused on investigating the transformational experiences leading towards a no-self experience and non-dual living. I incorporated a transpersonal theoretical orientation in order to discuss the co-researcher's experiences and applied a phenomenological hermeneutics research approach to illuminate and interpret the themes that emerged from their narrative descriptions. This chapter will begin by summarizing the major themes identified in Chapter Four. Following this, limitations to this study will be discussed. I will then explore possible implications of the research for the counselling field and end with my concluding remarks.

Summary of Research Findings

This study investigated the experiences of those who are on a journey to find out who they ultimately are. It explored the transformational experiences needed in order to change lives of those on a journey to becoming whole and complete. It was a means of engaging and connecting with those who identified themselves as being on a journey and inviting dialogue through which the lived experiences may present themselves. This was achieved by interviewing nine co-researchers who have been on a journey towards Wholeness for two years or more. From the interviews, I analyzed and interpreted the

findings which resulted in the emergence of nine major themes. I then presented their accounts in a narrative description. The structures of the themes have their roots in transpersonal developmental psychology.

The beginnings of a journey towards Wholeness often manifest in *moments of vulnerability* where ego-defences were removed opening one up to the abyss underfoot. This was characterized in the following sub-themes of *self-fragmentation* and *openness through trauma*. The qualities of emptiness or "filling the void" lead to a sense of disorientation, loss of energy, and self fragmentation. The old identified and acceptable forms of self-identity were falling away, producing a sense of negative emptiness and thus an openness to question what had been previously believed to constitute self-identity. Trauma was an experience that appeared to facilitate this openness more quickly. It represented a "moment of world collapse", whereby the loss of a loved one ushered in the experience of impermanence and psychological insecurity. This resulted in the choice between submerging oneself back into the hum of conventional expectations and social distractions, or investigating the deeper meaning behind these experiences. This showed how, for some these experiences were the catalyst for the beginning emergence of the journey towards Wholeness. It appeared to act as gateway into the transpersonal.

From the existential encounter with emptiness and impermanence comes the actual beginning of the journey itself: the pursuit of psycho-spiritual development. This second theme, *a journey into the unknown*, illuminates the self's departure into transpersonal states of consciousness. This was characterized by a felt sense of *increasing desperateness* in wanting to know the ultimate nature of self-identity leading to a quick

immersion in *the spiritual market place* of religious, alternative, and mystic pathways towards self-realization. Several co-researchers left for India in search of Wholeness. Through the practice of *psychic development* and *self-inquiry* a number of glimpses into conscious states beyond ordinary ego awareness were achieved. Meditative techniques became an integral practice in consciousness transformation resulting in a dis-identification from the body-mind construct. *A taste of witnessing* was a common experience on the journey. These experiences ranged from audible sounds, visions, and spontaneous felt qualities of spaciousness and acceptance, to expansion of self awareness beyond the body-mind which appears to coincide with Wilber's (1999b) psychic level of consciousness development.

The third major theme explored the experiences on the journey in relation to close family and friends. The further one travels along the journey, the more the call for a movement away *from social superficiality to embracing authenticity* in relation to the world is heard. With this, it was noted that a move towards embracing connections with those individuals on a journey towards Wholeness themselves was needed to facilitate growth and authenticity. It also meant the need to address family rules and roles of belonging. The role of parent also needed to be deconstructed and integrated into self-awareness. This represented a shift from Wilber's (1999b) level four of rules and roles to belong, to creating one's own authentic stance in existence. Authenticity was aimed at reclaiming essential parts of the self that have been hidden in order to be accepted and appreciated by others. In being authentic with others there were the feeling states of "sadness", "a fiery intensity", "spontaneity", and "acceptance". A noticeable decrease in external pursuits of pleasure and personal achievement was also noted.

The fourth major theme, *a turbulent encounter with ourselves*, dealt with psycho spiritual anguish and self-aggrandizement along the journey. Three sub-themes including *the dark night of the soul, believing one's own myth*, and *encountering the rot of spirituality*. The dark night appears to be a common experience encountered on the journey and represents a sudden involuntary disconnection from higher states of consciousness accompanied by feelings of "lack of interest," "depression" and "stagnation." It was identified that this experience can last for several months. The way to work through it was to accept and surrender to the experience. This was useful for some co-researchers as it reconnected them to their journey. Secondly, there was the tendency for self-aggrandizement to present itself. This manifested as the belief in one's own spiritual attainment in which the patterns of "spiritual self-importance" and "setting one's self up as guru" dominated conscious awareness. Since the journey was a path of ego-transcendence, this experience reflected the way in which the self attempts to prevent its own annihilation through reconstruction of itself under the guise of spirituality. This is nothing more than a subtler form of psychological survival. Thirdly, the rot of spirituality described the experience of mental turmoil when spiritual expectations were not being met, which led some to consider giving up the journey altogether. Many of these experiences fall under the pathologies existing at both the psychic and subtle levels of consciousness development (Wilber, 1999b). This was a fundamental experience along the journey because it appeared to reveal the co-researcher's expectations about the journey and hinted at the uselessness of spiritual seeking.

Another fundamental aspect of the journey was the *guru-disciple relationship*. This fifth theme suggested that a transformational opportunity existed in the connection

or devotion to a guru. The sub-theme of *a mirrored relationship* was followed by the next sub-theme *from devotional to non-dual* living where there is movement beyond an idealized guru fixation towards more of a non-dual orientation. In the presence of a guru or spiritual teacher a profound and immediate shift in consciousness occurred. Experiences into deeper levels of consciousness were realized. The guru assisted in mirroring back essential presence pointing to non-dual awareness existing in the eternal present moment. At some point on the journey a guru's assistance was needed to explore deeper dimensions of consciousness. Another transformation occurred in the understanding that the attachment towards a guru does, indeed, become a barrier to Wholeness. The need to work through this idealized fixation was critically important in the journey.

The sixth major theme was based on *exposing the root* cause *of suffering* which was inherent in the sub-theme of *seeking is suffering* itself. A number of "disappointments" were experienced in several co-researcher's journeys to India. This included the shock that in spiritual communities "the same human desires are going on" as in other conventional communities, and the expectations that Eastern religion and spirituality were the only paths to self-realization. This theme revealed that the act of seeking itself was dualistic and perpetuated a cycle of suffering. In observing the origin of suffering there was the sense that its roots were in personal beliefs and expectations about Wholeness, which resulted in the entire journey being thrown into question.

The seventh major theme, *the end of seeking*, explored the transformational experiences in realizing that seeking was a primary barrier to resting in non-dual awareness. These insights included the sub-themes of realizing there was *nowhere to go*

and revealing *the illusionary* nature of the individual *seeker.* In *nowhere to go* there was the dawning wisdom that seeking was a rejection of the present moment which "moves one away from their true nature." It also showed how the act of seeking existed in time, imbuing the journey with qualities of "futility", "no longer interested" and "pointless." What also stood out was the deconstruction of the individual self through a process of self-inquiry, including the realization that the individual self could not be located and hence could not be sought or improved on. The self was seen as a concept. When there was no point of self-reference, the illusionary sense of the separate self was glimpsed and the clarity of the present moment felt.

The eighth major theme identified the elements of *radical understanding,* including *the collapse of time* and *beyond knowledge.* Radical understanding was a dramatic shift in consciousness in which there was transcendence in conventional ways of knowing and being. This focused on the ways in which some co-researchers were able to understand that time was thought. Stepping out of time into the dimension of the timeless moment meant stepping out of the fixation on the past and hope for the future. The qualities of "timelessness", "acceptance with the moment", involuntary physical movements, and the absence of the individual self were felt when the activity of the mind ceased. These were characteristics of transpersonal states of consciousness. This was followed by the sense of "It's a lot easier being me, Now…." suggesting a being at ease within the present moment. There was also the ineffability in describing transpersonal states of consciousness, which pointed to the nonconceptual awareness of the absolute. Typical responses when asked to describe such states included "laughter," "silence," and

comments that "it just is," suggesting a non-knowing state of consciousness. All forms of conceptualization simply pointed to that which could not be described.

The last major theme, *luminous impersonal existence,* explored the glimpses into non-dual existence. This was a transformation from living a separate existence to a deep interconnected oneness with the eternal moment. Non-dualism was described as the absence of any form of dualism. Thus, consciousness was the absolute ground of existence and expression of all forms of manifest and unmanifest existence. The sub-theme of *always already here* showed that Wholeness was always the case and available in the connecting consciousness of the present moment. There was the expression of paradoxical living with the understanding that although the journey need not have begun, it could not have been otherwise because consciousness is one spontaneous expression. Momentary glimpses into this understanding rendered some co-researchers "traumatized," "speechless" and "breathless" with the intuitive sense that it was "as if something fell away". The world in which they had known was "blown to smithereens" and for a period of time there was the absence of any "self-reflecting consciousness." Also, a sense of expanded awareness beyond all boundaries was felt, accompanied by a feeling of "absolute perfection." Further, the sense that it was, in fact, "a non-experience" pointed to its paradoxical embracement.

The research was not intended to prove anything as such, but rather engage with those who have been on a journey towards Wholeness to share their experiences so that the meanings may present themselves. I will now consider the limitations of this study.

Limitations of this Study

There is a combination of strengths and limitations existing within this study that need to be acknowledged. Upon reflection, I noticed that a potential strength of this study is its primary focus on the different transformational experiences in consciousness as it applies to the journey towards Wholeness. It provides a detailed account of each co-researcher and their lived experiences with consciousness transformations and supports these by linking them to the already existing extensive literature on the developmental journey towards Wholeness.

Another strength in this study is my deep involvement with each co-researcher during the interview process. As I am very much already implicated in this research, I bring an existing knowledge base about the journey towards Wholeness and mixed with my own transformative experiences, this allowed me to become immersed in each co-researchers' story. As I stated in Chapter One, a few co-researchers considered me more than simply *the* researcher but more of a co-researcher. Such an engagement allowed for a deep discussion about the emerging major themes and sub-themes along the journey.

However, it could be argued that this is also a limitation. I took steps to ensure that this study was not simply a projection of my biases. I began by acknowledging my own personal experience and involvement in the journey. More importantly, I provided each co-researcher with a transcript of the identified themes to see if they connected with them. Although, even with these precautions, all of my personal biases could not, ultimately, be eliminated. However, hopefully, this research will invite readers new to

this topic to consider the expansive nature of consciousness and for those who are on a non-dual journey to explore how these themes emerge in their lives.

Also, one could state that the sample size of nine co-researchers is relatively small. My intention was to limit the sample size so that I could get a deeper reading of the emerging themes on the journey. I wanted to honour the spirit of doing phenomenological hermeneutics. However, because of this, it becomes clear that no claim to universal generalizability can be made.

In addition, seven of the nine co-researchers were male and no gender differences in relations to transformative experiences were considered. The problem here is that this suggests to the reader that men and women share similar transformative experiences towards Wholeness, which is not necessarily the case. I also interviewed two couples. Although they were interviewed separately, there was consideration as to how their relationship may influence the themes that emerged in their lives. How could I be entirely sure that the co-researcher was not simply reporting about their loved one and not themselves? Also, all co-researchers were white males and females of the Western culture. There was no mention of how the journey unfolds for those of a different culture. These are significant limitations to the study.

It is also important to note that the themes outlined in this study are not a fixed portrayal for what it is like for everyone to be on a journey towards Wholeness. Thus, no claim can be made that everyone will resonate with these experiences.

Implications for Counselling

A Necessary Journey for Counsellors

As an emerging existential-transpersonal counsellor I noticed that although this study does not address the counselling relationship the findings do appear to have some implications for counselling that need to be addressed. Nixon (1992) stressed the critical importance of counsellors beginning their own journey. Counsellors can meet the needs of clients on a journey towards Wholeness by familiarizing themselves with the extensive literature is essential rather than fall into predictable, traditional counsellor expertise. We are beginning to see clients arrive to session dealing with one or more issues across the spectrum of consciousness. The themes presented in this study suggest a number of potential areas of concern to be acknowledged for own entering the session having been on a journey of self-discovery. It would seem a call for counsellors to begin their own journey is needed.

Fortunately we have a number of counsellors who have embraced their own transformational journey towards Wholeness while integrating it into their own practice. These include Wolinsky (1996) and his experiences with the sage Nisargadatta Maharaj, A.H. Almass (1995) and his personal application of the Diamond Approach and Prendegast (2003) and his encounters with Eastern and Western non-dual teachers.

There is now, more than ever, an intimate connection between Western counsellors and teachers from the Eastern Wisdom traditions which is becoming more welcomed in the counselling field (Fenner, 2003). Specifically, counsellors are beginning

to introduce and facilitate non-dual wisdom in their private therapy sessions, but as Prendergast (2003) emphasizes there has to be "... some degree of firsthand familiarity with non-dual awareness either through spontaneous openings or through a lengthy association with non-dual teachers and teachings" (p. 10). It is not enough to simply parrot teachings or employ the next counselling "trick". We can see for example, Nixon's (2001) personal account of merging with the silence of the present moment when working through feelings of deficient emptiness: He states:

> As I sat there in the silence of my own pervasive hopelessness it felt as if I had discovered the true magic of the present moment for the first time. It was not a feeling of negative emptiness but to my shock I felt the eternal connecting consciousness and the roaring silent fullness of the present moment.... Since my personal transformational realization and experience about five years ago, in therapy work with clients, I look for opportunities to facilitate the journey of clients from deficient emptiness to the roaring silence of the present moment (p. 57).

As another example, one co-researcher, Mark, has been able to integrate his own psycho-spiritual transformations in working with the addicted population. He attempts to facilitate the journey in others by leading weekend meditation retreats and psycho-spiritual workshops.

The themes of this research offer us a glimpse into what some of the experiences for those on a journey towards Wholeness and, as such, encourages counsellors to consider their own journey when meeting the needs of clients wishing to go beyond conventional psychotherapy.

Counselling Strategies in Facilitating the Journey towards Wholeness

The integration of non-dual wisdom and conventional psychotherapy is occurring. Prospective clients are acknowledging the benefits of counselling strategies that invite awareness of the unconditioned mind (Fenner, 2003). There are a number of different strategies transpersonal counsellors can utilize with clients when facilitating the journey towards Wholeness within the therapeutic setting (Prendergast, et al, 2003; Walsh and Vaughan, 1993; Welwood, Wolinski, 1996; 2002; Vaughn, 1986).

Meditative techniques including *vipassana* and *zazen* approaches are readily used to expand awareness beyond the conditioned body-mind. Particularly with *zazen* meditation one is invited to adopt a certain posture and embrace a witnessing position, in which one simply watches what arises in the moment. This allows for a dis-identification from habitual thought patterns and emotional states (Suzuki, 2005).

Self-inquiry is a similar approach used by non-dual therapists in facilitating dis-identification from the body-mind. Wolinsky (1986) found that by prompting clients to ask themselves "From where does that thought arise?" (p. 19) whenever a thought surfaced in their mind, a moment of stillness was experienced. The more one practised self-inquiry the more they experienced the unconditional mind for longer periods of time.

Another approach to Wholeness is integrating repressed aspects of the self commonly known in Jungian psychology as "Shadow Work". According to Miller (1990), uncovering the content of our projections, examining our "slips" of the tongue, considering our sense of humour, and studying our dreams allow us to become increasingly aware of how we have denied undesirable aspects of ourselves. It would be

the therapist's job to tease out the clients' shadows in order for them to observe its process and integrate it into awareness.

Therapists who redirect clients to experience present moment awareness are inviting clients to observe the benefits of letting go of conventional notions of time. Tolle (1997) points out that to be identified with your mind is to be trapped in time. To rest in the eternal present moment is to surrender the compulsive activity of the mind. The Now moment is the space in which life unfolds. This, in essence, is another way of surrendering separate self existence.

Finally, another strategy in facilitating the journey towards Wholeness when counselling clients is the ability to accept absolute hopelessness. This teaches clients on the journey that there is nowhere to go and that any form of seeking takes one further from the unconditional present moment. In his own transformational experience in accepting absolute hopelessness, Nixon (2001) found that this was not a negative experience, but rather a paradoxical one, in which all of his future-oriented hope projects collapsed and he was immediately connected with existence in the present moment. He observed that by encouraging clients to rest in absolute hopelessness, the habitual pattern of seeking ended.

These are a few strategies therapists can use when working with clients in facilitating a journey towards Wholeness.

Revisiting the Implicated Researcher

The process of completing this thesis has been a transformational journey in itself. As the implicated researcher, I attempted to remain conscious of my already existing biases regarding the journey towards Wholeness. With this in mind, I understood the importance of remaining open to the interview experience as it unfolded. Van Hesteren (1986) continually pointed to the need for "openness to experience" rather than from a constricted place of predetermined perceptions. To experience and be alive to "what is" in the present moment allows for the possibility of personal transformation for both the researcher and co-researcher.

I found this to be the case in several instances with a few co-researchers while interviewing them. Specifically, while interviewing co-researchers, Nancy, Alan, and Dan, there were frequent moments of stillness in which the conventional notions of time, space, and self-identity fell away. These were spontaneous experiences, which dissolved my usual conceptions about the journey to Wholeness and in which I found my own perceptions about the journey begin to change.

In the end, I found these experiences extremely humbling, as they brought me to a place of not-knowing, and reminded me that the journey towards Wholeness is a moment-to-moment process.

Suggestions for Further Research

One of the most important points to consider regarding this study is whether males and females share the same transformational experiences on the journey. I have to remember that the two females interviewed were in a relationship with another co-researcher, so no representation of what it is like for women to be on a journey could be readily made. It would be exciting to explore if there are any significant differences between men and women. For example, since the major theme, *a turbulent encounter with ourselves,* only described the experiences had by men including the sub-themes of *the dark night of the soul, the belief in one's own myth,* and *encountering the rot of spirituality,* it would be interesting to see if these experiences are shared by women. Also, what of the role of mother? Is this a role that is easily transcended? In the sub-theme, *stepping out of family bureaucracy,* we heard of co-researcher dis-identifying from his role as a father but no account of what it is like for women. Thus, further exploration is needed in describing the different transformational experiences in consciousness of men and women on the journey towards Wholeness.

Another exciting suggestion would be to take a look at how the journey unfolds for couples. Are the paths similar? What qualities are displayed in the relationship as each partner reaches new dimensions of consciousness? Also, it would be important to explore the journey towards Wholeness from different cultural lenses.

In agreement with Nixon (1992) another important suggestion is the need for further research on the journey itself. The co-researchers' stories may be considered as small openings into what it is generally like to be on the journey. Attempts have been

made to connect these themes with the extensive literature on the journey towards Wholeness. It is crucial, as passionate researchers, and on the journey ourselves, that we never cease to engage in discussions about the journey. For the journey is a celebration of a never-ending-process. This allows us to be open to the unfolding mystery of the journey towards Wholeness.

Conclusion

This thesis has been a presentation of nine co-researchers and their different transformational experiences in consciousness along the journey towards Wholeness. Completing this thesis also had a journey quality to it as well. I am very grateful to have been invited into the lives of each co-researcher and allowed to celebrate the journey together. It is with hope that the sharing of these experiences has allowed the reader to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be Whole and what potential transformational experiences are needed in becoming whole. More importantly, it is an invitation to celebrate the availability of Wholeness found in the present moment and witness, if only for an instant, the ineffable mystery of what we truly are.

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Appendix A

Letter of Consent
The Non-Dual Experience: A Phenomenological-Hermeneutics Investigation of the Seeker's Journey Towards Wholeness
Brian Theriault, M. Ed: Counselling Psychology student
University of Lethbridge

Interviews with both male and female individuals who have been on the journey towards Wholeness for 2 years or more will be conducted. The purpose of the study is to illuminate themes, which present themselves within the journey towards Wholeness.

The research will require each individual to co-researcher in an initial 2-hour interview with a follow up interview of approximately 1 hour. If necessary, additional interviews may be required. Participation is voluntary and individuals who wish to discontinue the interview may do so at any time.

Co-researcher responses will be kept confidential. The data collected from the interviews will be shared only with the thesis supervisor, transcriber and myself. The tapes will be destroyed upon publication of the research. Each co-researcher will be identified by self-selected pseudonyms, as chosen by the co-researcher.

The results of this study may be published in academic journals and/or a book, and/or presented at conferences and/or university classes.

Each co-researcher will be engaged in a follow-up meeting with myself for the purpose of presenting the conclusions generated by the research. You will receive a copy of your transcript, and may also request a summary of the study.

Your participation is appreciated. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (403)-320-2019 or via email at brian.theriault@uleth.ca. Questions may also be directed towards Dr. Gary Nixon, thesis supervisor, Coordinator, Addictions Counselling, University of Lethbridge, (403)-329-2644.

I have read and understood the above information and agree to be interviewed.

Signature:____ Date:____________________

Appendix B

Advertisement
Research into the Journey Towards Wholeness
Brian Theriault, M. Ed: Counselling Psychology student
University of Lethbridge

Brian Theriault is a student in the Master of Education: Counselling Psychology Program at The University of Lethbridge conducting a study of the journey towards Wholeness and movement towards non-dual living. This journey involves a qualitative shift in one's mode of experiencing and involves the expansion of one's self-identity beyond ordinary thinking and ego self-awareness. Experiences can include feelings of "isness" or "amness," embracing the eternal present moment, stillness, or dissolution of the dualistic nature of subject and object. Research co-researchers who have been on a journey towards Wholeness for at least 2 years or more are wanted for an interview that will take 2 hours. Co-researchers will be provided with a transcript of their interview. If you would like to participate in this study, please call Brian at (403)-320-2019. Interviews will be conducted in Lethbridge, Calgary, or Vancouver.